



Erik Fosnes Hansen is one of Norway's most renowned contemporary authors. His works have won multiple awards and been translated into more than 30 languages, and have been reviewed in journals such as *The New York Times Book Review* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. His debut novel, *Falketårnet* (*The Falcon Tower*) was published in 1985, when he was only 20 years old. The second, *Salme ved reisens slutt* (*Psalm at Journey's End*, 1990), was a major bestseller which established him as one of the leading European writers of his generation. A later novel, *Løvekvinnen* (*The Lion Woman*, 2006), about the life of an outsider, has recently been made into a film. Fosnes Hansen is also a literary critic, journalist and biographer.

Janet Garton is Emeritus Professor of European Literature at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. She has published books and articles about Nordic literature, including *Norwegian Women's Writing 1850-1990* (1993), *Contemporary Norwegian Women's Writing* (1995), *Elskede Amalie* (2002) and a biography of Amalie Skram, *Amalie* (2011). She has also translated Bjørg Vik, Cecilie Løveid, Paal-Helge Haugen, Kirsten Thorup and Henrik Ibsen.

Lobster Life

by

Erik Fosnes Hansen

Translated from the Norwegian
by Janet Garton



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University College London
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E-mail address: norvik.press@ucl.ac.uk

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The next day after breakfast I was to blaze the trail. Already the evening before, whilst they were eating dinner, not to mention as the time drew on towards midnight, Herr Brehm and his travelling companions had been raring to go. Best of all they would have liked to set off on the hunt for fishing lakes immediately, and skipped Jim's delicious stew – constructed from the remains of the wedding roast, and presented as *Der traditionelle, lappische Eintopf* – but Grandfather had assured them that it was a long walk, which was true enough, and that the best thing was to have an early night and meet the next day's exertions with well-rested sport-fisher bodies, advice which they did not take. It was really difficult, as they said, now that they were so far north, to register how late it was, without looking at the clock. They carried on carousing until midnight and beyond before they looked at the clock, sharing their joyous expectations of the number of lively, fresh, leaping and absolutely genuine *norwegische Bergforelle* they were going to catch. The fishing licences were acquired, the cool bags were standing ready. Jim had orders to clear space for the catch in the freezer room. They consumed white wine and beer, together with the odd dram; I didn't follow that closely, but I could still hear them as I went upstairs in the private apartments. Karoline and her parents had been sitting in the lounge for a while playing cards, but they clearly found that the yodelling had got a bit much, and went upstairs early.

So now it was time to blaze the trail. Even if Herr Brehm and his *brave Burschen* were not quite on top form, they were undeniably on time, and were all in reception ready

for the off on the stroke of nine, wearing their fishing jackets and with assorted equipment dangling from every belt and every loop. They jangled each time they drew breath. I myself was wearing light walking clothes and boots, and carrying a rucksack of provisions. Grandfather called the gentlemen to order, and presented me as his *Enkelsohn, der sich bestens auskennt*. Which was true enough. If you've grown up in a mountain hotel, there isn't a puddle in the area that you haven't cast a line into at one time or another.

'Even though he may still be young in years,' continued Grandfather lyrically, 'Sedd is someone who knows the secrets of the mysterious waters. He knows where the genuine, pink, leaping Norwegian mountain trout is to be found.'

The gentlemen stared at me sceptically, whilst I made every effort to look as Norwegian as possible, without apparently convincing them. But they trotted along behind me, and Herr Brehm said politely in Norwegian:

'You go first and show us the way.'

I had done all this before, and had a plan of action. So after we had been walking for an hour, and the company needed a little rest and an energy supplement for the gentlemen in the form of a thimbleful of schnapps from the Flachmann in Herr Brehm's anorak pocket, it was time to create a bit of Norwegian atmosphere.

I asked the gentlemen whether they would perhaps be interested in hearing a genuine Norwegian folk song? They would definitely be interested. So I launched into 'Mannen og kråka', which they thought was just fascinating. Especially since I could explain in my excellent German exactly what each verse was about. 'Mannen og kråka' is, when all's said and done, an extremely moral composition, and that did not escape the company. They particularly liked the verse which describes how the man makes twelve sets of rope out of the crow's guts.

Herr Brehm's happy company of fishermen wanted to hear it again at once. I knew that they would begin to join in the

chorus now, so I suggested that I should sing it as we walked, since this was a traditional song composed to be sung as you walked through barren mountains and forests. It's possible that I was stretching the idea of tradition a bit when I said that, but they weren't to know that. Besides, it's true that it's a good song to walk to. So I launched into song, and with regular manly outbursts of 'hei-fara!' and 'falturilturaltura!' we made good progress before it was time for new energy-giving drops from Herr Brehm's Flachmann.

The sun had begun to warm up, and I had tied my jacket around my waist, but an angler's lot is not a happy one, as the poet says: the Germans, poor things, could not remove very many clothes without at the same time removing the sum total of their equipment. But they held out bravely. During this pause I performed for them another traditional Norwegian folk song, and they listened entranced to the fishing song 'Byssan lull'. In a devout and emotional mood, my melancholy rendering of all six verses carried us as far as the first lake, Blåvann.

The impressive thing about Blåvann is that you first have to climb over a small ridge, before you catch sight of it. But when you've done that it appears right in front of you, blue as ever, and if you are for example a German, or for that matter a British, Dutch, Danish or French sport-fisher tourist, you exclaim in wonder. Blåvann is always the same; nothing special about it, about one and a half kilometres long and perhaps six hundred metres across at the widest point, with a fairly sheer mountainside along half of one long side, and otherwise a fairly typical lake. But the Germans, who thanks to my valiant efforts in the field of folk music had accepted me as an Ur-Norwegian, a child of nature and son of the mountains, provided the requisite exclamations of wonder. They called on *mein Gott*, *meine Güte*, *Donnerwetter* and other Teutonic gods as witnesses to *wie wunderbar schön* the whole thing was.

And it is true that when you saw Blåvann like that, mysterious and dark and at the same time glistening slightly

in the morning sun, it is understandable that it made an impression.

Even greater enthusiasm when I could show them the rowing boat, 'Fåvne II', which belonged to the hotel and was moored at one end of the lake.

It is a well-known fact that there is nothing German sports fishers love more than risking their lives by standing up in a small rowing boat without a life jacket, casting a line. That's why, as Grandfather had many times sternly instructed me to do, I made a short warning speech to them about the dangers of a sailor's life, invoking real and invented regulations issued by the authorities and by the hotel, and showed them where the life jackets lay under the thwarts. Then I pointed out some of the best fishing places on shore, not without a certain air of secrecy, and explained mystically that it would pay to cast towards that headland or that rock, although in reality the fish tended to bite more or less the same anywhere in the lake. But a fishing trip can't be successful without a certain element of magic.

Four of them wanted to fish from land, three wanted to go out in the boat. I put on a life jacket in order to lead by example, but the anglers showed no sign of wanting to put theirs on. It was their own responsibility, and I didn't want to ruin the mood, so I made do with a meaningful glance at the life jackets in the bottom of the boat. I took the oars and we rowed off. Once again I explained to them with many secretive glances where it would pay to cast. They listened to me as intently as if I were telling them where to find the sunken Atlantis.

And then the usual nightmare began. Herr Brehm was the first one who wanted to stand up. I tried to explain, in as calm and friendly a way as possible, that it is not such a good idea to stand up in a low rowing boat which has its centre of gravity about a metre and a half above the gunwale, especially if you are going to make violent throwing movements with your arms at the same time. I explained, as

reasonably and Ur-Norwegianly as I could, that you can cast just as well if you remain seated in the boat.

'Aber,' Herr Brehm objected, 'you can't cast as far when you're sitting down.'

I had been here before, and I knew that it was impossible to get him to understand that the length of the cast was completely irrelevant when you were already in the middle of the lake; out there it made no difference whether you were casting fifteen metres or two. So I left them to their fate, as they one after the other stood up from their seats and cast their lines in different directions, and the boat rocked alarmingly. I was wearing a life jacket myself, but as always I experienced a slight internal shudder at the thought of what would happen on the day when I suddenly found myself in the middle of an ice-cold mountain lake, surrounded by slightly inebriated continental tourists who were not wearing life jackets, but who were on the other hand hung about with a number of heavy objects which would quickly drag them to the bottom.

'It's extremely deep here,' I ventured, but *Dortmund Sportanglerverein e.V.* just went on casting. 'Legend has it,' I ventured, 'that Blåvann is bottomless,' but the anglers had now become one with nature and had all their senses tied up in their fishing lines which whirred out of the spools time after time, into the far distance over the ripples on the lake. Soon a shout from the shore announced that the first angler had caught a fish, and straight after that one of the men in the boat also made his first catch, an event which almost capsized the whole vessel; but as they were all standing, like a group of passengers on a bus, they fortunately balanced one another out with their movements and their casts.

So the morning passed without any accidents, and everyone caught fish, both from land and from 'Fåvne II'.

It was time to have lunch and swap positions, and we made a small fire. In my rucksack I had sour cream, salt and pepper, as well as Jim's cucumber salad in a large plastic box. We roasted some of the finest trout on twigs over the fire,

and the call of the wild became so intense that they asked me to give them a new song. Well, if truth be told I don't know all that many folk songs, but 'En ekte lofottorsk jeg er' is always a winner on such occasions, particularly because it also has a catchy chorus. The seven agreeable Germans caught on at once, and we had a good time sitting round the fire. Especially as it transpired that a couple of them had a bottle of Riesling with them, which they now consumed with even more *fadderullandei*. Herr Brehm's Flachmann did the rounds again as well. They asked me if I would like some, both of this and of that, but I just shook my head gently in child-of-nature fashion, like the son of the mountains I was, and they respected that.

The next group in the boat was clearly more unstable than the first, and just as life-jacketless, but they did catch fish. And without any accidents. Nevertheless, I was very pleased when they started to look at their watches and it was time to suggest that we should set off on the walk home.

No-one made any objections.

Worn out by mountain sun and mountain air, full of lively, fresh Norwegian mountain trout and Riesling plus extras, and very satisfied with the day's catch, the stout-hearted anglers trotted in front of me in a happy group all the way back to the hotel. It had been a successful day in all ways, and Grandfather would be pleased.

In the yard Karoline was standing waiting, already supplied with golf clubs. I saw her from a long way away. She began to fuss even before I had got my rucksack off. Was I ready for the day's tournament?

'Not now,' I said.

'Why not?' Her eyes were shining with desire for a game.

'Because I've been on a long fishing trip with our guests,' I said, peeling off my rucksack. We had arrived in reception, and the Germans were uttering long fanfares of praise about the glorious, wild Norwegian mountains and the fantastic trout, about their fishing successes, about the sun, about me and even about the boat. Grandmother, who was there to

receive them, shone like a sun as well and expressed polite enthusiasm that everything had gone so well.

‘Just one round, please?’ she begged.

Fortunately her father came along to rescue me.

‘I think that Sedd – it is Sedd, isn’t it? – is a bit too tired right now, Karoline,’ he said admonishingly.

She pulled a long face, no doubt partly because he was talking to her like a child.

‘Perhaps I’ll be able to play in a couple of hours,’ I said to cheer her up, at the same time as I wondered why her father or mother couldn’t play with her.

She brightened up. Her father said:

‘We would like to have played with her’ – in an apologetic tone – ‘but we both have to go down to the village for a while. We have things to do.’

This was rather strange, because it was unusual for our guests to have any need to go down to the village again once they had got away to the mountains, but I just said that I was sure I could give her a game later on.

After that it was off to the kitchen with the lively anglers, where Jim was standing ready to gut the fish and put it in freezer bags. He kept back some fillets so that the gentlemen could taste their own fish for the evening meal, prepared à la meunière.

I went up to the private apartments, showered away the mountain air and the fish guts, and relaxed for an hour before I had to be in the firing line again.

I could tell that I was tired, because she beat me without any effort on my part in one of the three rounds we played. She paid with a ten-kroner note the first two times, but the last round I let her have free.

‘I’m going to be an expert in minigolf,’ said Karoline. ‘We’re staying for three weeks. At least!’

‘Are you really,’ I said politely. I had a feeling that there would be innumerable rounds of minigolf from now on.

'Another round?' She looked pleadingly at me as she leaned on a putter and rocked eagerly to and fro on her trainers.

'No more today,' I sighed. 'It's dinner time now. I think we're having trout.'

'Trout? Yuck.'

'I helped to catch it.'

'Oh.' She thought a bit: 'I suppose trout is OK. Now and then.'

'Especially when it's cooked à la meunière,' I said. 'And covered in almonds.'

'Oh, that sounds great! Are you having some too?'

'No. We never eat with the guests. We're having stew from yesterday.'

Before the next day's fishing trip Grandfather gave his usual talk about the hotel's Golden Age for the guests.

It was held as always in the Heimdal room. I went along as well, partly out of old habit, partly to demonstrate that I was a loyal and interested heir, but mainly in order to avoid having to play even more rounds of golf before dinner.

On the walls in the Heimdal room there hung pictures and souvenirs from the Golden Age and other times in Fåvnesheim's history. Right back to the first Zaccharias, who with his own two hands had built the first tourist cabin up here, for the entertainment of British lords and other members of the aristocracy, then via his sons, who had improved the place so that it became internationally renowned and had had a road constructed all the way up. There were pictures of the sons, heavily bearded, in their smartest Sunday clothes. A yellowing cutting from *The Times* showed the hotel's first international advertisement. There were also pictures of the hotel as it had been at that time, a large L-shaped house over two floors, but of course without all the wings which had been added later. In the picture an enormous Norwegian pennant was waving from a gigantic flagpole, and there were carriages outside the entrance. The

staff were lined up around the flagpole. If you counted them in the picture you got to 27 people, large and small.

'*Ganz Europa,*' Grandfather intoned in a voice which trembled slightly with pride, 'yes, the whole of the fashionable continental clientele was attracted up here into the mountains, just like you are today, gentlemen. Artists as well ...'

Grandfather waved his hand to indicate the two beautiful landscapes on the opposite wall, which both illustrated the area around the hotel, one by Wentzel and the other by Thaulow, both of them significant names in our national history of art, who had each in their turn sought fashionable inspiration up here.

'*Wie schön, wie schön,*' said the gentlemen, who were listening with interest.

Change of scene. Change of period. New wall.

'After the two World Wars and the depression in between,' Grandfather explained, 'Fåvnesheim experienced a fantastic boom during the fifties. As the standard of living in Norway gradually improved, more and more people came to the mountains, and Fåvnesheim was able to capitalise on its solid traditions and its excellent reputation amongst the more cultured classes from earlier times.'

The pictures on the third wall, still in black and white, showed immaculately clad ladies and gentlemen in elegant skiing outfits in bright sunshine, nearly all of them wearing teardrop-shaped sunglasses. From one picture to the next the hotel was growing in the background, wing by wing, extension by extension. A somewhat faded hand-coloured photo in a heavy frame showed a gentleman with no beard but an impressive moustache, smiling at the photographer. In one hand he held a Dunhill pipe, in the other a staff.

'*Mein Vater,*' said Grandfather devoutly.

One of the gentlemen coughed, but Grandfather took no notice. He described developments on into the sixties, when really large numbers of Norwegians, now definitively freed from postwar worries, made excursions into the mountains.

'Easters in those years,' Grandfather was lost in memories.
'Easters in those years ...'

Another cough from the audience.

'Normally we had a staff of up to forty here in high season And all the rooms fully booked. Just about always.'

'That's fascinating,' interposed one of the gentlemen quickly. 'Really fascinating. Tell me, Herr Zacchariassen, did the hotel attract significant Norwegian artists during this period as well?'

'No,' Grandfather admitted. 'Not to the same extent.'

Finally Grandfather showed them his great-grandfather's staff, which hung in a display case over the door, the same one which his father had been holding in the photo. The relay baton, you might say, which had passed from father to son for generations, and which had followed the hotel through good times and bad. Mostly good times, thank the Lord. And he expressed a sincere hope that the gentlemen had been satisfied with their stay so far.

'Ja, ja, sehr schön. Alles bestens.'

Were the gentlemen interested in hunting? In that case he would be more than happy to show them his collection of hunting trophies, which he had stuffed himself.

No, no, not so interested in hunting. There wasn't much opportunity for hunting in the neighbourhood of Dortmund, which unfortunately was heavily built up. But there were some good fishing ponds here and there, where you could keep your eye in with line casting whilst you were waiting for your year's trip, not to say expedition, to the really free and genuine nature reserves of this world, where it was still possible to feel that that you were a human being; but goodness me it was high time to get spruced up a bit before dinner.

Dortmund Sportanglerverein e.V. streamed as one body out of the Heimdal room in the direction of their rooms. I remained behind together with Grandfather. For a moment he looked small in his suit.

'Just as good as always, Grandfather,' I said. 'It's just like Grandmother says: people appreciate a bit of history.'

'True enough,' said Grandfather. 'True enough. I really appreciate you coming along, Sedd, when I talk about these things. One day it may be your turn to – yes.'

He waved his hand rather vaguely, whether to indicate the staff or Thaulow was not easy to see.

'I caught three trout for us today, Grandfather,' I said as we began walking towards the private apartments.

'That's good, my lad. That's good.'

'Times will always get better, Grandfather.'

'Let's hope so.'

'All history shows us that.'

'Yes,' said Grandfather. 'It does indeed.'

On the last day of the Germans' visit the weather took a turn for the worse. There was a bit of wind, and it was cloudy, but it wasn't raining. And the weather was definitely not too bad for fishing. *Überhaupt nicht.*

For the sake of variety they were going to walk a short way downhill from the hotel this time, where the river Svartå flowed. For quite a long stretch it ran through flat countryside, and it was a good fishing area.

There were fewer fish here than up in the mountain lakes, but the guests appreciated the change of scene. And as lunchtime approached, we could suddenly hear enticing calls from the thicket just above the river, interspersed with notes from a Hardanger fiddle. Out from the bushes emerged a fiddler from the district, in full rig, closely followed by a folk dancer dressed as a wood nymph in national costume and silver brooches, crooning and humming. A little way behind them appeared Jim with one of the temporary staff, carrying two large picnic baskets and a camping table.

The gentlemen from Dortmund were beside themselves with enthusiasm. Whilst the fiddle played and the wood nymph hummed, Jim served up a magnificent cold table, so that the guests' stay in Norway might finish on a memorably

high note. The fact that a few raindrops started to appear was immaterial. After an appropriate interval, Grandfather himself appeared to see how things were going, as he said. He was greeted with cries of joy and gratitude. Such an incredible experience. So unique. So unforgettable. The boys back home in Dortmund, those who hadn't been able to come, would be green with jealousy. And the wives. The wives too. Absolutely green. Yes, Herr Zacchariassen, they said as the white wine splashed into their glasses, who knows? Who knows whether they ought not to find their way up here again another year, precisely here, to the pure, unpolluted, fresh and genuine Norwegian mountains, where they had been so well received, and Herr Brehm added in Norwegian: 'I haff always loved Norway. Ever since I vos here the furst time.'

'Yes,' Grandfather smiled.

He was wearing his ancient, elegant climbing jacket with plus-fours, and looked just like a distinguished elderly hotel owner should. He lit his Dunhill pipe, the one he had from his father, and listened with satisfaction to the exclamations of gratitude, even allowing himself half a glass of wine.

The wind made violent billows in the skirts of the representative folk dancers, and a couple of gusts threatened to overturn the camping table. It was not going to be possible to do any more fishing that day, but in any case they were leaving later that afternoon. So we marched as a body back up to the hotel, that is to say Grandfather, the Germans and I, whilst Jim and the others disappeared quietly back to the car which was parked up on the road, a few minutes' walk away.

Outside the entrance stood Karoline, watching out for us. She began at once to wheedle about more minigolf. I did my best to shake her off, but she was pretty insistent. Just for once Herr Brehm addressed me in German; he winked and said: '*Pass mal auf! Sie flirtet mit dir!*'

'Nein,' I informed him, '*sie möchte nur Minigolf spielen.*'

'I see, is that what it's called now?' said Herr Brehm, and disappeared upstairs to pack.