

# late night library

## Late Night Interview with Berit Ellingsen – *Not Dark Yet*



*Not Dark Yet* by Berit Ellingsen wants to take you places. Published by the Ohio-based Two Dollar Radio, the story moves from the city to the country, flirts with the stars and all the space in between, and takes short jaunts back to the city. Setting plays an important role, a wonderful success of Ellingsen's prose considering there is never once a country or city name written. You don't need them. These places are your places, they're everyone's.

Late Night Library chatted with Ellingsen about the writing process, her use of color and themes, and environmental concerns, which loom large in the narrative without overwhelming. Ellingsen has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and British Science Fiction Award, and published a book of short stories, *Beneath the Liquid Skin*, and a novel, *Une Ville Vide*. *Not Dark Yet* is out now.

**AUSTIN WILSON: Do you remember the first seed of *Not Dark Yet*? If so, what was it?**

BERIT ELLINGSON: Some years ago I wrote a poem that essentially describes the last scene in *Not Dark Yet*. The poem and the image kept returning, so I decided to expand on it and turn it into a novel. It was one of those stories where you can sense a larger structure looming in the distance, like a building in thick fog, so I knew it would be too long for a short story.

Because I started at the end, I had to “rewind” to the beginning and find out what happened, and what led to that final image. Of course, a slightly haphazard approach like that resulted in several scenes and parts that were not used in the final edit. But that might also have happened even if I had planned the story in sequence from start to finish.

**AW: You do a wonderful job of building the world with the scientific data, some given through dialogue with the character Kaye, other times in informational passages that inform and never land squarely on the soapbox. Did you worry about the story seeming too “on message”?**

BE: I’m very glad to hear it isn’t too “soapboxy”. That’s always a danger with a work that has a message, however integral to the story it might be. In the initial drafts I didn’t worry much about that, but just wrote what I felt about the subject into the story. In later edits the informational passages were changed to be less preachy.

This is a good thing, because no one likes stories that are mostly soapbox-speeches and political views. At the same time, I do find it odd that there isn’t more writing or talking about climate change, in literature, and other art forms, as well in the news and the public consciousness. But there are probably many reasons for that, ranging from the fact that climate change is a complex issue, to fear and a feeling of powerlessness at the individual level, to saturation and noise at the community and media level.

**AW: Was there any need to embellish or fictionalize the current state of environmental crises? Or did the planet provide enough scary details?**

BE: Embellishing or exaggerating data about climate change for the novel would have been counterproductive to the whole story, as well as unnecessary. The

scientific data and prognoses were more than dreary enough, so there was no need to add to them.

Actually, in the about three years that have passed since the first draft, the numbers I used have even started to look a little dated. Since then we've had new global temperature records every year, and the suspicion that the large glaciers and ice sheets of Greenland and Antarctica have started to melt has been confirmed. Right now I can't think of a single climate change indicator, such as species extinction rate, sea level rise, ocean acidification, extreme weather events, number of floodings, etc. that have progressed in the rate the scientists thought they would. All of the climate change indicators have changed faster than expected.

At the same time renewable energy is more widely used today, which is positive. But the greenhouse gas emissions continue, and the materials necessary for the renewable energy technology are very much finite.

**AW: I think you're right that the complexity of the issue limits how much it's discussed in fiction, even in non-fiction. And your mentioning that renewable energy tech relies on "very much finite" materials scared me a bit! It can feel like a lose-lose situation. Is the margin for success so small we're basically playing the lottery with our future?**

BE: The materials that human civilization uses are finite, but some more than others, especially rare earth metals, which are essential to technology such as phones and computers, but also solar cells. Today, even sand suitable to use as concrete for construction, such as windmills, is a depleting resource.

In addition, the production of technology solar cell panels and windmills requires a lot of energy, as well as water and other resources. Still, increased use of renewable energy forms is very much preferable to continuing to use fossil fuels the way we are currently doing.

The efforts that we need to do to curb climate change that may make large regions of the planet unsuitable for human habitation, and even unsuitable for much animal and plant life, are easy to recognize: lower CO2 emissions by reducing our use of fossil fuels, especially coal, and leave the remaining reserves of fossil fuels in the ground. This will have a big positive effect, even if other negative trends such as habitat destruction and plastic pollution continue.

But practically, to reduce the use of fossil fuels, and even harder, to leave remaining reserves in the ground, will be very difficult, not the least because there are strong power structures that resist such changes. I recommend journalist Naomi Klein's book *This Changes Everything* on this issue.

**AW: On my initial read through I noticed the main character's name hadn't been said in a few pages and started flipping back through to see if I'd missed it. Why did you choose to include it in the first line rather than avoiding it completely, as you did with the names of all cities and countries?**

BE: I wanted his name to reflect that he has a background that is somewhat different from the majority of the people in the country he lives in, and even different from his closest friends and lovers. I wanted that to be a part of the story, even if it's a very small part which most readers might miss. The idea was that the name should give certain associations, but also that these should fade and the general lack of a name make it easier for the readers to identify with the protagonist. That was the reason for withholding the place names as well.

**AW: The narrative perspective dives down into the main character's mind, but also zooms outward, far enough away to take in vast expanses of landscape, sometimes even immense portions of the galaxy. How similar is this to other stories you've written recently?**

BE: That's probably typical for my stories, especially the longer ones, such as *The White*, which is set in Antarctica. I regard it as a work hazard from writing about space science and cosmic events almost daily. But I do understand why that's not a common approach.

**AW: Colors appear often, notably utilized in beautiful descriptions of nature, but also in reference to the main character and how he feels. "At the edge of the horizon, between the black ocean and the pewter sky, a slice of orange burned, like the last embers of a fire." It works as more than mere setting and description. It has an almost synesthetic quality. What does color represent to you in the story?**

BE: I'm very glad you say that. Colors are probably more important to the story than I'm consciously aware of. In most instances the colors are tied to the landscapes, architecture, interiors, and environments of the novel. Colors are important because they are part of the setting, which I view as almost a character in its own right. Or at least something that is very integral to a story. I really enjoy

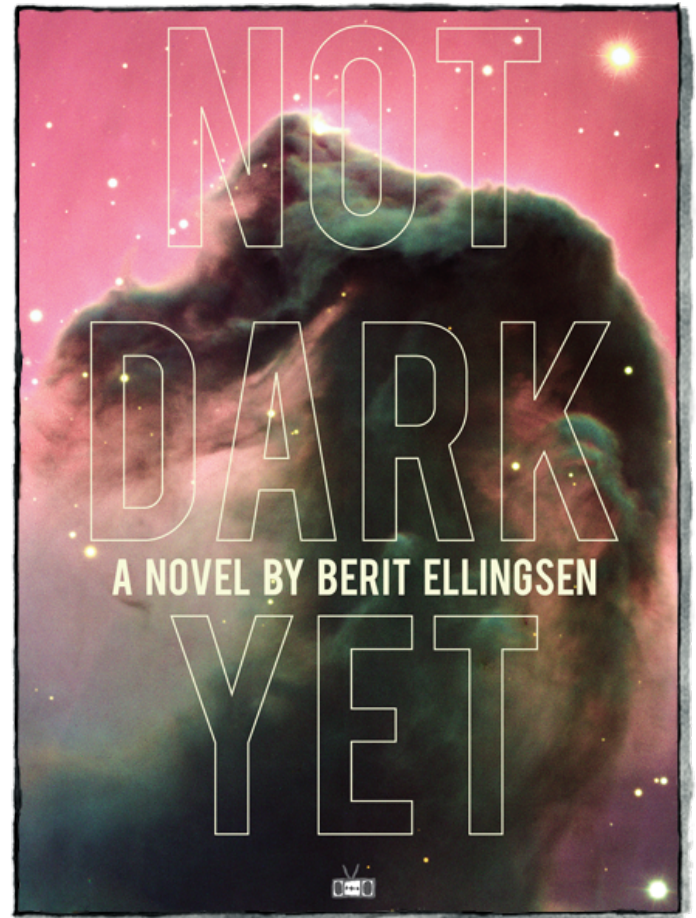
natural landscapes, as well as human-made environments and architecture, and thus it becomes a theme in my writing as well.

**AW: The book has a very warm feel to me, with the romance demonstrated as both intimate love and the search for adventure; and science delivers the terrifying verdict of humanity's carelessness, but also the vehicle for our potential survival. I think it definitely qualifies as a drama, and even as a romance, but books usually land somewhere in between broad and incredibly specific labels. How would you classify *Not Dark Yet*?**

BE: I'm very glad to hear the book gives a warm impression. I would leave classification up to the readers, because I suspect the classification will vary a lot and depend on the readers' own background. I think some might see it as a drama, others will view it as a romance, or a science fiction story, or a climate fiction thriller, or even a zen-inspired tale, and neither would be wrong.

**AW: In the interview with your publisher, Two Dollar Radio, you stated that the astronauts in your book aren't looking to escape problems on Earth, but rather to "...explor[e] the unknown." Even knowing the main character had dreamt of visiting Mars since childhood it was hard to not see his move from the city to a remote cabin as the first step in a planned escape, with Mars being the only place far enough away to feel properly removed from his past mistakes. Is escape a conscious, subconscious, or non-existent theme in the book?**

BE: It's probably both conscious and subconscious, and may be a part of the theme of change, which is definitely one of the big subjects in the book. A desire to



change could be seen as a wish to escape the current situation, place, or state of mind. Maybe we don't even welcome change, or seek it voluntarily, unless the present situation is difficult or unsatisfactory in some way.

When it comes to escape, Scandinavians love their cabins as a getaway, and go there to relax, usually with family or friends, to get fresh air, and recharge to get back to daily life. But if you go to a cabin alone, you might find yourself getting a closer look at your inner processes and issues than if you had stayed in the city. Long duration space missions might be the ultimate in potential cabin fever. One of the biggest questions in developing such missions have been how people will handle living in close confinements with the same few others for a long time, while having to do a lot of work on a strict schedule and needing to be able to cooperate well with the rest of the team.

It's comparable to the crew of a submarine or a research base in a very remote location, only with more serious health hazards, such as osteoporosis. Going there can of course be an escape from something, but it certainly won't be a holiday.

**AW: Death hangs around quite a bit, sometimes silently, other times quite overtly. You cited the haiku *Not Quite Dark Yet* by Yosa Buson as inspiration, and that piece evokes death somewhat. During my reading of *Not Dark Yet* I started finding death in places that I wasn't expecting (I'll avoid specifying due to spoilery material). Do you view death as a major theme in the book?**

BE: Very much so, death, and also decomposition, not only of the physical body, of much of the planet's life but also as a process of change, the leaving behind of old attitudes and habits for new ones, whether it's forced or wished for, are big themes in the book. Maybe also in most of my fiction.

Traditional haiku, such as Yosa Buson's, can be seen as describing the death of the physical body and the physical world, but also the transition of the self and its attitudes, and the death of a sense of ownership and control of one's life. I like traditional haiku a lot, especially Buson's and Basho's, and wanted their themes to be part of the book too.

**Berit Ellingsen** is a Korean-Norwegian writer whose stories have appeared in Norton's Flash Fiction International Anthology, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and *Unstuck*. She is the author of the story collection *Beneath the Liquid Skin*, and the

novel *Une Ville Vide*, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the British Science Fiction Award. (Author photo by Alexander Chesham.)

**Austin Wilson** writes comics and prose, his first graphic novel is scheduled for publication in 2016, and he has a short story in the *Mythic Indy* anthology. Favorite authors include Nora Ephron, Michael Chabon, and Ray Bradbury.

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