

Belletrista

Home | [Reviews](#) | [New & Notable](#) | [Features](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact](#) | [Donate](#) |

Reviews

DROWNED

Therese Bohman

Translated from Swedish by Marlane Delargy

Reviewed by **Rachel Hayes**

It's high summer, and student Marina decides to take refuge from her lacklustre university studies and her dead-end relationship at her sister Stella's home in the Swedish countryside.

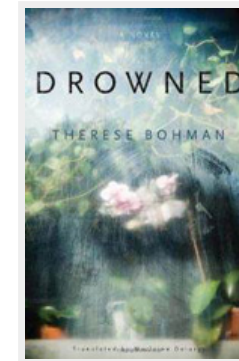
Stella is several years older than her sister, and she appears to have everything that Marina doesn't. In particular, Stella has a successful career in the local parks department, designing the town's floral displays ('the youngest person ever to hold this post, and the first woman as well'), and a stable, albeit fairly new, relationship with Gabriel, a charming older man and successful writer, who dotes on Stella. Stella and Gabriel live in a beautiful old house that had belonged to his family. With their books and flowers, and their delicious food (cooked by Gabriel) and good wine, they appear to inhabit a perfect world in which Marina is a gauche observer.

All is not quite as it seems, though, and Marina starts to feel increasingly ill at ease without knowing why. An uncomfortable tension builds up, mirrored by the growing oppressiveness of the summer heat. Stella's happiness starts to seem to Marina to be an act, whilst Gabriel becomes ever more brooding and unpredictable. Marina continues to watch, but through her very passivity she becomes dangerously involved in what's going on in the house.

Marina is a first-person narrator, so everything is seen through her eyes. Is she really less pretty than Stella? Does Stella really carry off her clothes with so much more style? Probably not—don't most of us have hidden insecurities around our siblings? It seems to me that Bohman uses Marina's insecurities to sow doubts about her reliability as a narrator.

The oppressive atmosphere and the enigmatic character of Gabriel stayed with me for a long time after I'd finished reading; I kept going back and wondering about him. I also wondered about the sisters, and I'd have liked a little more background information about them so as to understand them better; I couldn't really see why they act (and allow others to act towards them) the way they do. Is it because of something that happened in their childhood, some shared experience? The behaviour of both women is quite atypical, in different ways, and extreme enough to warrant an explanation of some kind. I was willing to be convinced, but I needed more detail to make things plausible.

So what really happens to Stella, Gabriel and Marina? I can't tell you, and not because I don't want to spoil the plot—the only way to find out is to read it and decide for yourself.



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