

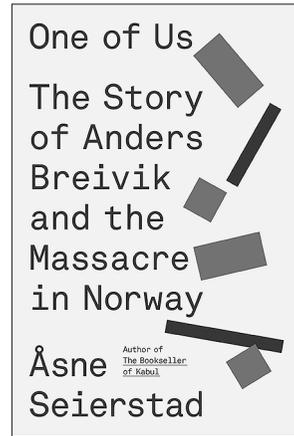
# Anders Breivik, the Massacre and Norwegian Identity

*One of Us: The Story of Anders Breivik and the Massacre in Norway*

by Åsne Seierstad. Trans. from the Norwegian by Sarah Death. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. Hardcover, 530 pp., \$28.

Reviewed by Kate McQueen, University of Illinois, United States

On the afternoon of July 22, 2011, thirty-two-year-old Anders Behring Breivik drove to Oslo's government quarter, parked his van containing a self-made bomb outside the prime minister's office, and lit the fuse. As the bomb exploded and chaos ensued, Breivik set out for the island of Utøya, forty miles to the north, dressed in a homemade police uniform, and armed with an automatic rifle and a handgun. For more than an hour Breivik hunted down and shot teenagers who had gathered on the island for the ruling Labor Party's annual youth camp. In addition to the eight killed from the bomb blast, Breivik fatally shot sixty-nine people, and injured more than one hundred. The motive? To save Norway by beginning a war against "cultural Marxism," that is, feminism, multiculturalism, and the increasing presence of Islam in Europe.



This attack is at the heart of Åsne Seierstad's book *One of Us: The Story of Anders Breivik and the Massacre in Norway*, published in Norwegian in 2013 and in English translation in 2015. The book opens with a heart-wrenching scene from Utøya, and a scrupulous sixty-two-page reconstruction of the attacks forms its weighty climax. Yet Seierstad's chronicle is much more than an account of a horrific and unprecedented crime. "*One of Us* is a book about belonging," she writes in her epilogue, "a book about community . . . it is a story about us" (523).

Seierstad takes her theme's radical inclusion seriously. This exhaustively researched book is multilayered and densely populated. Not one but three distinct narrative strands propel readers forward on the long march from Breivik's birth in 1979, through the attack and subsequent trial, and into the early days of the author's research.

The lengthiest of these strands tells Breivik's story. It is an evenhanded portrait of an intelligent but deeply troubled young man, whose unrequited search for admiration haunts every stage of his life. He spends an unhappy youth chasing first the approval of an emotionally unstable mother, then of gangs and graffiti artists. Later, he courts the regard of aspiring businessmen and youth leaders in Norway's right-wing Progress Party. Breivik becomes obsessed with the external trappings of success; he

undergoes a nose job, wears make-up and designer clothing, acquires a posh address, and pursues get-rich-quick schemes like selling fake diplomas. He even manages to land a deeply coveted invitation to the Freemasons.

In 2006, the strain becomes too much. Breivik retreats into a room in his mother's apartment, where he spends all of his energy playing *World of Warcraft*, often up to seventeen hours a day. Gradually he abandons gaming for the chat rooms of right-wing extremism, only to emerge five years later deeply delusional, the self-appointed commander of the (imaginary) "Norwegian anticommunist resistance movement." He rents a farm outside of Oslo, writes a rambling 1,500-page manifesto, and plans an attack intended to usher in a new world war.

Meanwhile, two other chronologically interspersed narratives offer a powerful counterweight to Breivik's tale. One follows three young friends from Troms—Simon Sæbø, Anders Kristiansen, and Viljar Hanssen—and the other Bano Rashid, a girl from a Kurdish family who had taken asylum in Norway during the Gulf War. We see these four teenagers come into the world, grow up among family and friends, and develop personal goals and political aspirations. And we see them die: Simon Sæbø, shot while helping others to safety, Rashid and Kristiansen killed while huddled alongside each other, his arm draped protectively over her. Of the four, only Viljar Hanssen survives the gunshot wounds, which rob him of an eye and a hand, but not his sense of humor. His brave and witty testimony against Breivik provides a rare ripple of laughter during the otherwise grim court proceedings.

What holds these personal histories together is the ever-present political story of contemporary Norway. Like most of its European neighbors, this small, homogenous country underwent significant cultural and social shifts in the later decades of the twentieth century. These changes—the growth of the welfare state, a demographic altered by guest workers and political refugees—are not simply a backdrop. Seierstad shows clearly the impact they have on the lives of her subjects, creating a generation of Norwegians large and diverse enough to include both Bano Rashid and Anders Breivik.

Seierstad's own place among her subjects is worthy of pause. This award-winning foreign correspondent, best known for her bestseller *The Bookseller of Kabul* (2002), admits that prior to the attack she considered her native Norway a refuge, not a subject of investigation. Taking a seat in the press box at Breivik's trial in April 2012, Seierstad found herself "knocked sideways . . . I was not prepared" (514).

One can only imagine, then, the anguish of writing this remarkable work of journalism. Seierstad's omniscient narration remains calm, deliberate, and authoritative, even in the most terrifying moments of the Utøya attack. Readers are spared nothing, not the soft feel of brain tissue beneath a shattered skull, not the taste of gunpowder following a bullet to the jaw, not the sound of a daughter crying into her father's phone seconds before her death. The only strain in Seierstad's steady voice comes from describing the gross ineptitude of the state and police in response to the ongoing threat: roadblocks not constructed, helicopters not called, police radios turned off, dinghies that sink, emergency phone services that failed as Breivik twice tried to surrender himself to the police.

Long before the shock of the attacks began to wane, Norwegians had to face the difficult question of what to make of Breivik. Was he a madman or a political terrorist? Was he a lone wolf or did he speak for a part of the nation, as he claimed? As the book's final chapters show, the Oslo District Court decided to accept Breivik's sanity and hold him responsible for his acts, but the impulse to reduce him to someone small, petty, and other, was hard to resist. "In many ways I find it repellant to write about Anders Behring Breivik," Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard admits in the *New Yorker*. "Every time his name appears in public he gets what he wants, and becomes who he wants. . . . And yet we must write about him, we must think about the crisis that Breivik's actions represent."<sup>1</sup>

This is precisely what Seierstad's rich and engaging narrative journalism does: it demands that readers consider Breivik's attack from all aspects and contexts. The benefits of such a task continue to be relevant, even for current readers of this translation. Breivik may belong to Norway, but with the problem of homegrown terrorism expanding within the United States and Europe, the reminder becomes ever more urgent that those who pick up the gun and pull the trigger are, in fact, one of us too.

---

### Notes

1. Karl Ove Knausgaard, "The Inexplicable: Inside the Mind of a Mass Killer," *New Yorker*, May 25, 2015, 30.