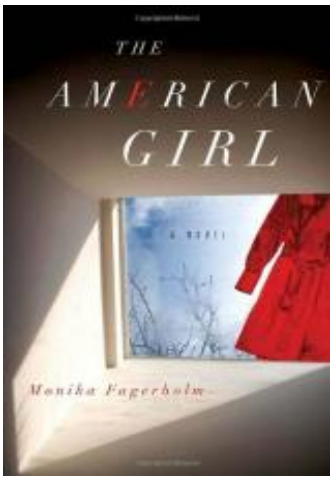
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The American Girl

by Monika Fagerholm



About the Book

In 1969, a young girl makes a trip from Coney Island to the swampy coastland on the rural outskirts of Helsinki, Finland. There, her death will immediately become part of local mythology, furnishing boys and girls with fodder for endless romantic imaginings. Everyone who lives near the swamp dreams about Eddie de Wire, the lost American girl. For both Sandra and Doris, two lonely, dreaming girls abandoned in different ways by their parents, this myth will propel them into their coming-of-age through mischievous role-playing games of love and death, in search for hidden secrets, the mysteries of the swamp, and the truth behind Eddie's death. The girls construct their own world, their own language, and their own rules. But playing adult games has adult consequences, and what begins as two girls just striking matches leads to an inferno that threatens to consume them and tear their friendship apart.

Crime mystery and gothic saga, social study and chronicle of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a portrait of the psyche of young girls on the cusp of sexual awakening, **The American Girl** is a bewitching glimpse of the human capacity for survival and for self-inflicted wounds. Fagerholm is a modern day heir to the William Faulkner heritage of family tragedy, with a highly musical and literary prose style that is rich with wit and literary allusions. **The American Girl** will teach you the meaning of trust as you give yourself entirely to the wholly original storytelling style of Monika Fagerholm.

Discussion Guide

1. The structure of **The American Girl** is not a conventional linear narrative. The author forces the reader to assemble a coherent story from impressions, occasional historical facts, the characters? play-acting, mysterious clues, interior monologues, and the rhythm of her prose. This technique, which mirrors real life, can be frustrating or liberating. Which did you find it? Discuss the ways this technique hinders understanding the characters? actions, and the ways it deepens our understanding their inner lives.

2. Eddie de Wire --- the American Girl --- is a Swedish-speaking Finn who falls for the early culture of punk rock while traveling around the United States in the late 1960s. The author makes many references to the music of that era, liberally sprinkled throughout the text, showing that popular music is terribly important for adolescents as they establish their identities. Discuss the ways in which the musical references such as ?What Have They Done to My Song, Ma? help develop Eddie?s character in the novel.

3. On page two of the novel, we are told that Eddie de Wire was drowned in a marsh. When do we find out how she died and whether she was murdered or not? Were you surprised to learn what really happened or had the author given you enough clues such that the revelation grew organically from all that had come before? When did you suspect the truth?

4. Much of the action in the novel is seen through the eyes of Sandra and Doris, the two teenage girls who construct their own fantasy narrative based on the mystery of Eddie de Wire?s death and the supposed involvement of all the inhabitants of their seaside community, even as they explore the sexual limits of their summer friendship. Is their view of Eddie?s life and death true? What about their view of their parents and their parents? adult friends --- even if the facts are false, is the impression ?true?? Can you cite other instances in which the stories people make up are truer than straight reportage?

5. In the novel we detect a constant tension between the year-round inhabitants of the District (who are lower working class) versus the nouveau riche summer people. How does the author use Doris Flinkenberg?s attempt to move between these two worlds to shed light on the struggle between classes?

6. Women?s liberation was just beginning to become an issue during the period the main action of the novel takes place. Free of being typecast as second-class citizens, women were then challenged to establish their own identities, and independence. The book is filled with many female characters, from teenage girls to the Islander?s sex kittens, from wives and aunts to professional women and academics, from rich girls to impoverished and grieving mothers, seemingly illustrating the whole spectrum of the gender?s possible lives. Name five major female characters and describe how each one displays a separate aspect of modern womanhood.

7. Some of the characters have more than one name; for example, Bengt is also called Bencku. Some of the characters have the same name: both Sandra and Doris are called The Marsh Queen. And some of the characters are only known by their nickname, like The Black Sheep. The author uses this technique to simulate the way we come by knowledge in real life, having to tease out ?who did what to whom? when different witnesses use different names to refer to the same people. Make a list of all the names that Doris and Sandra use in referring to themselves and others. How many names are you known by?

8. Can you identify ?the City by the Sea?? A clue: the novel alludes to an international summit meeting that took place there in the mid-1970s.What do you know about the culture of Finland and the various communities that comprise its population?

9. John Gardner once commented that there are only two basic plot-lines out of which all narratives are woven: someone goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. In **The American Girl**, who goes on a journey? And who is a stranger that comes to town (other than Eddie de Wire)?

Author Bio

Monika Fagerholm was born in 1961 and belongs to the Swedish-speaking community in Finland. Her much praised first novel, **Wonderful Women by the Sea**, became one of the most widely translated Scandinavian literary novels of the mid-1990s. Two years later, it was made into a motion picture. In 1998, it was followed by the cult novel **Diva**, which won The Swedish Literature Society Award and Nyland's Art Award. Her third novel, **The American Girl**, became a number one bestseller and won the premier literary award in Sweden, The August Prize, as well as The Aniara Prize and The Gothenburg Post Award.

Critical Praise

"...dark but powerful."

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