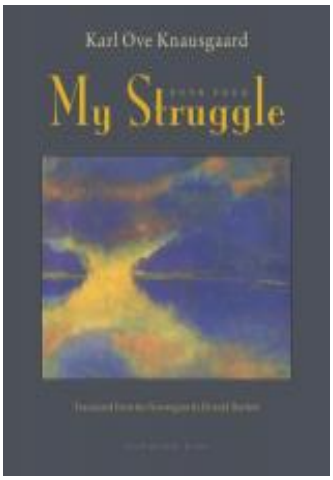
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My Struggle: Book Four

by Karl Ove Knausgaard



About the Book

The fourth installment in the eagerly awaited, internationally celebrated MY STRUGGLE series

Book 4 finds an 18-year-old Karl Ove in a tiny fishing village in Northern Norway, where he has been hired as a schoolteacher and is living on his own for the first time. When the ferocious winter takes hold, Karl Ove --- in the company of the Håfjord locals, a warm and earthy group who have spent their lives working, drinking, joking together in close quarters --- confronts private demons, reels from humiliations and is elated by small victories. We are immersed, along with Karl Ove, in this world --- sometimes claustrophobic, sometimes serenely beautiful --- where memories and physical obsessions burn throughout the endless Arctic winter. In Book 4, Karl Ove must weigh the realities of his new life as a writer against everything he had believed it would be.

Discussion Guide

1. As Book 4 begins, Karl Ove is headed to Håfjord in Norway?s fabled far north to teach public school. How does Karl Ove describe Håfjord? What aspects of the town do you find most notable? What are his ambitions for his year there? Considering Karl Ove?s desires, in what ways is this an ideal place for him to be? In what ways is it limited? Would you want to live in Håfjord for a year?

2. Almost as soon as he steps off the bus at Håfjord, Karl Ove begins trying to write stories. Why do you think his first serious efforts as a fiction writer coincide with his first serious experience of living away from home? Do you consider 19 to be a good age to start trying to write fiction?

3. Early in Book 4, Karl Ove mentions that his father gives him the idea to go north and teach. In what other ways does Karl Ove resemble his father in Book 4? Do you feel that his father?s influence is on the whole a good thing or a bad thing for Karl Ove?

4. How does traveling to Norway?s far north fit in to the narrative of Karl Ove?s development as a person? How does it fit into the narrative of his development as an artist? What sorts of common archetypes related to growing up and becoming an adult does it partake of (e.g., starting over, going on a quest, etc.)? How are such things as archetypes and master narratives important to us as we create our sense of who we are?

5. What lifelong connections is Karl Ove severing by going so far away from his home? What can he escape by going north, and what can he not escape? Is there anything distinctive about the possessions he chooses to take with him and the relationships he tries to preserve? If you were going far away from everything for a year, what would you take with you, and whom would you try to remain in contact with?

6. Book 4 marks a transitional point in Karl Ove?s life. He is 19, he has just graduated from high school and he is leaving home for the first time. In what ways is he becoming an adult? In what ways is he still a child?

7. Karl Ove?s fascination with women is very evident in Book 4. What did you find most notable about his interactions with women, and what does he seem to want out of them? How does his behavior change when he?s around a woman? Do you think he idealizes the female gender? Do you think his feelings toward women go beyond the simple adolescent lust that most 19-year-old males feel?

8. What are some of the situations in which sex suddenly --- and uncomfortably --- makes its presence felt for Karl Ove? How does he respond to the sudden stirrings of desire? To what extent does he resolve his feelings about sexuality as he matures over the course of Book 4? And to what extent is sexuality an ongoing question that never quite leaves him throughout MY STRUGGLE?

9. Explaining why he chooses to steal cigarettes as part of his youthful acts of rebellion, Karl Ove says that he is ?pushing my personality toward one of the places where I wanted it to be.? Have you ever tried to do this with your personality? What does Karl Ove want out of himself, and why does he feel dissatisfied with who he currently is? What do you think of stealing cigarettes as an act of rebellion? How did you rebel as a young adult?

10. In Book 4, Karl Ove talks very frankly about the blackouts he experiences while drinking heavily during his adolescent years. Do you think he is an alcoholic, or possibly has alcoholic tendencies? Does any of this behavior relate back to his father?s alcohol abuse? What sorts of signals (either implicit or explicit) about alcohol does Karl Ove?s father give him during their interactions in Book 4? What about the community at Håfjord? And do you think that Karl Ove?s experiences with alcohol are tied in any way to his artistic temperament and his ambitions to be free from restraint?

11. Knausgaard repeatedly writes about how important and wonderful his teenage years were. He also claims that as one grows older, life becomes less passionate and meaningful: ?Oh, this is the song about being 16 years old and sitting on a bus and thinking about her, the one, not knowing that feelings will slowly, slowly, weaken and fade, that life, that which is now so vast and so all-embracing, will inexorably dwindle and shrink until it is a manageable entity that doesn?t hurt so much, but nor is it as good.? Why do you think he feels this way? Do you agree with this presentation of life? What

aspects of adulthood does Knausgaard marginalize when he valorizes youth like this? Overall, do you think Knausgaard really prefers youth to adulthood, or is he just nostalgic?

12. What is the nature of Karl Ove and Hanne?s relationship? Did you have an ambiguous friendship like this in high school or college? What do you make of Hanne?s behavior the evening she comes over to Karl Ove?s house while he?s home alone, dressing provocatively and asking Karl Ove to touch her? Why does Hanne act as she does? Is she trying to seduce him, or do you think she is more naïve and innocent about what she is doing? How does Karl Ove respond to her advances? Is he right to act as he does?

13. Why do you think Yngve seems to be so much more in control of his alcohol consumption than Karl Ove? Does it relate somehow to their different relationships with their father? Do you think it ties in to their personalities, and traits they might have inherited? How might Karl Ove and Yngve differ in other important ways, particularly in the things they learned from their father?

14. Do you have any personal experience with divorce, either in your own family or in the family of someone close to you? What important things do the children of divorced parents need to process and get past? How do you think Karl Ove and Yngve are doing processing their parents? divorce? How does it continue to affect them in young adulthood? What do their parents do to both help them and to make things more difficult?

15. Why do you think that Karl Ove?s grandparents (on his father?s side) say that he can?t come over to visit them anymore? What actions might have precipitated this? Is this decision really more about Karl Ove or his mother? Are they right or wrong to say this? Why does Karl Ove feel that it?s his fault, what does he learn from this episode, and how does he eventually move on with his life?

16. Why does Karl Ove get so drunk on the day of his father?s second wedding? How does Karl Ove?s father respond to his provocations at the dinner that follows the ceremony? How do all of the subdued tensions between Karl Ove?s father and his two sons come out as everyone gets progressively drunker? Do you think that Karl Ove and his father drink so much in part because they can?t find a healthier way to release their feelings? What feelings and experiences does alcohol unlock for them? Is it okay to release their feelings this way, or should they try to find other ways?

17. In Book 4, Karl Ove begins to talk with his parents about their divorce and his father?s decision to leave his mother. Why do you think now is the time he starts to have these conversations? What kinds of problems materialize because of the ?double life? he must assume because of his parents? How is his way of interacting with each parent different? Do you think divorce was the right thing for them? Which parent seems to have more baggage from the divorce?

18. During his soccer team?s trip to Switzerland, Karl Ove is very moved when one of the soccer players from the senior team confides that he admires Karl Ove for drinking heavily and risking his life by climbing on the Swiss roof. Why does Karl Ove desire the approval of older peers so much? What do you think this episode teaches him about how to behave and impress people, and how do you think lessons such as these will influence his development as an adult?

19. In general, how does Karl Ove respond to peer pressure throughout Book 4? Do you think his actions contradict his image of himself as a rebel and an independent mind? In order to be successful, must a writer break away from the group?

20. Why is Karl Ove so obsessed with sex, and why does he always ejaculate before he can actually manage to achieve intercourse? How does his premature ejaculation fit into his fear that he is too feminine, which we have seen again and again throughout Books 1?3? What does Karl Ove do throughout Book 4 to prove to himself and others that he?s a man?s man? Ultimately, do you think Karl Ove is right to try to ?man up,? or should he just be happy with himself as he is? How do you think his feelings about his masculinity relate back to his father, who is very macho while married to Karl Ove?s mother but then becomes more feminine when he takes up with his new girlfriend?

21. About his drinking, Karl Ove states that ?what happened was that the person I usually was began to draw in the person I became when I was drinking, the two halves slowly but surely became sewn together, and the thread that joined them was shame.? What do you think he means by this? What aspect or aspects of his personality does each ?half? of Karl Ove represent? And why is shame the ?thread that joins? these two halves of him?

22. Throughout Book 4, Knausgaard relates a lot of encounters between Karl Ove and the students in his care. Which of Karl Ove?s students do you like the best? Which ones do you dislike? What does Karl Ove learn from being a teacher? Do you think he is too young and immature to teach?

23. Reflecting on the writers he liked as a young man, Karl Ove says that the novels of the Latin American magic realists ?almost exploded with plots.? By contrast, when explaining his fellow Norwegian Knut Hamsun, Karl Ove says that ?no one went as far into his characters? worlds as he did, and that was what I preferred.? As to his own writing, Karl Ove says, ?I had only one world, so that was the one I had to write about.? Why do you think Karl Ove prefers what Hamsun does, even if he admires the magic realists very much? Why do you think he says he ?had only one world?? Do you think of MY STRUGGLE as being more in line with Hamsun or the magic realists? Why? What other authors does MY STRUGGLE remind you of?

24. How do you feel about Karl Ove developing feelings for his student Andrea? Why does he develop feelings for her, and how does he respond to them? Do you approve of his response? Why does he include that short anecdote about meeting her again when they are both adults?

25. In reference to Andrea, Karl Ove says that he works hard to keep his distance from her and that ?the other teachers didn?t need to do this, for them distance was a fact of life that nothing could break. For me it was something I had to create.? Do you think this is an accurate self-evaluation on Karl Ove?s part? In what other relationships do you see him struggling to establish the correct amount of distance? Why do you think he has these challenges, and do they at all relate to his desire to be a writer?

26. Looking at the last batch of events that occur toward the end of Book 4 --- Karl Ove choosing to sit out the Constitution Day celebrations, drunkenly trying to kiss a seventh grader, getting accepted to writing school, being fined for failure to appear in court (and letting his stereo payments go), having a final argument with Nils Erik, and finally having sex for the first time --- do you think that Karl Ove has learned anything about being an adult in his year in the far north? In what ways has he matured? In what ways does he still have much room for development? And knowing what you do of him from Books 1?3, in what ways do you think his maturation succeeds or fails as he grows older? Lastly, how do you hope (or expect) to see him develop in the final two books of MY STRUGGLE?

Author Bio

Karl Ove Knausgaard?s first novel, OUT OF THE WORLD, was the first-ever debut novel to win the Norwegian Critics? Prize, and his second, A TIME FOR EVERYTHING, was longlisted for the 2010 International Dublin Literary Award. The *My Struggle* cycle of novels has been heralded as a masterpiece wherever it has appeared. His work is published in 35 languages. Knausgaard?s latest novel is THE SCHOOL OF NIGHT.

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