



## Ashes in My Mouth, Sand in My Shoes

*Per Petterson*

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Arvid is six years old and lives on the outskirts of Oslo. His father works in a shoe factory; his Danish mother works as a cleaner. Arvid wets his bed at night and has nightmares about crocodiles, but begins to piece the world together. One day his father is collected in a black car; his grandfather has died, like the bullfinch. When Arvid sees a photo of his mother as a young woman he understands how time passes and then he cries and says he doesn't want to get old. And one morning the teacher tells the pupils to pray to God because a nuclear war is looming.

These are beautiful tales of growing up from prizewinning international author Per Petterson.

## **Ashes in My Mouth, Sand in My Shoes Details**

Date : Published November 14th 2013 by Harvill Secker (first published 1987)

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Author : Per Petterson

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## From Reader Review *Ashes in My Mouth, Sand in My Shoes* for online ebook

### **Beth says**

I was excited to read this little novella, but ended up feeling pretty meh... about it. Luckily there is more Petterson to be read, this one just wasn't for me.

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### **Sonja Arlow says**

This was a sweet novella that gives the reader snippets in the life of a little boy, Arvid, living with his parents in Norway in the early 60's. His father works in a shoe factory and his Danish mother works as a cleaner. Arvid wets his bed at night and has nightmares about crocodiles, but slowly he is beginning to piece the world together.

Looking at life through the eyes of a sensitive, hyper-imaginative child is always insightful and I enjoyed the stories full of humor and poignant observations.

The writing is simple and straightforward, with occasional beautiful prose.

I found out only after finishing that it's a prequel to the book *I Curse the River of Time* which I want to read at some point as well.

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### **Rick says**

*Ashes in My Mouth, Sand in My Shoes*, the beautifully titled and realized collection of ten short stories, all featuring Arvid Jansen, the protagonist of Petterson's later novel *I Curse the River of Time* (2008), was first published in Norway in 1987, and at last here. Why at last? Two reasons. First, here is the first line of the first story: "Dad had a face that Arvid loved to watch, and at the same time made him nervous as it wasn't just a face but also a rock in the forest with its furrows and hollows, at least if he squinted when he looked." From the word go, Petterson's prose is sharp, poetic, real.

From a later story: "It was still early, the sun was up, the sky blue, and he liked to walk behind Dad and see his broad back carrying the rucksack as far up the hill as Trondhjemsveien to catch the bus to town. The air was cold and fresh and Mum ruffled his hair as they said goodbye at the door and pulled his blue wooly cap down over his ears." Simple, direct description: specific and graced with the significance of the ordinary. There are echoes of Hemingway (and London) in this early work, Petterson's own version of the Nick Adams stories that appeared in *In Our Time*, but the voice is fresh, the sensibility uniquely Petterson's.

The second reason is more complex. The collection is dedicated to Petterson's father. Significantly the dedication includes the father's lifespan, 1911-1990—the years perhaps the only addition to the dedication for this newly translated edition. What makes it significant is these stories, fecund photographs along a coming of age storyline, were written before the tragic ferry accident that claimed Petterson's father, mother,

and two other relatives, an event that profoundly impacted Petterson's life and sensibility. So with *Ashes in My Mouth* readers are given insight into a gifted but still maturing prose stylist and to a perspective innocent of a life shifting tragedy.

The collection is a magnificent gift, one that I assumed would just be an interesting prelude to reading *I Refuse*, Petterson's latest novel to be published in English, but proved, in fact, to be a prelude to an immediate re-reading of *Ashes in My Mouth*, *Sand in My Shoes* and *I Curse the River of Time*.

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### **LA says**

Wonderful childhood stories filled with humor and the everyday life of a boy.

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### **Julie M says**

Great vignettes of a boyhood in 1960's Norway, told in 2nd person from "Arvid's" POV. This collection helped launch Petterson's literary career.

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### **Erika says**

A small book, which is really a set of disjointed short stories told by the child Arvid. Very Norwegian in phrase (which as usual is quaint and adorable). Arvid is the holy fool of sorts - seeing things as they really are with a kind of innocence that cuts through adult ways of being and seeing. The book itself was unsatisfying, I think it is the prequel to a later novel about the adult Arvid. I am curious to see if the later novel is more satisfying.

*"He held his hands to his face as if to keep his skin in place and for many nights he lay clutching his body, feeling time sweeping through it like little explosions. The palms of his hands were quivering and he tried to resist time and hold it back. But nothing helped, and with every pop he felt himself getting older. he cried, and said to his mother: 'I don't want to get older. I want to stay like I am now! Six and a half, that's enough, isn't it?"*

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### **M. Sarki says**

Nothing to get hung about. Basically just another book for a Petterson "completist" to read. Charming little stories that offer little to nothing to rave about. But no disappointment as I already expected his short work to not do me like he does with his novels.

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### **John Hatley says**

This book is brilliant! Having read several of Per Petterson's novels before now, I was lucky enough to find a used copy of his debut book, and I love it. Although described as a short-story collection, it could just as easily be a novel. Each chapter does indeed tell a story in its own right, but in the end, whether novel or collection of short stories, it is in my opinion a beautiful book. I can recommend it, regardless of the language you read it in. I really don't think that a bad translation of this great book could be produced. Since it was first published in 1987, I'm sure it has been translated into multiple languages.

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### **Jenni says**

I really loved this. This is a collection of short vignette stories from a young boy's life. Each story really spoke to a childhood experience or how it feels to be a kid in a world of adults. It was just so wonderfully engrossing and I can't wait to get to this author's other works.

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### **Nelson Wattie says**

This short book of short stories was Per Petterson's first publication in Norwegian, though not in English translation, where it followed some substantial novels. It might be thought of as apprenticeship work, but that would not be fair to the talent that could make these brief episodes ring with a multitude of sound and meaning. The stories are interconnected, chronologically following a small boy's life, so that they are like fragments from a novel. Indeed, considering that fragmentation is a feature of many (post)modern novels, these 150 pages could be read as a novella with the reader making the connections.

Everything is small to the point of modesty. The small boy is Arvid, who lives with his small family in a small Norwegian town. Arvid would prefer not to go on growing – “I want to stay like I am now! Six and a half, that's enough, isn't it?” he says to his mother. But from Chekhov through Carver and on (and perhaps one should go backwards, too, to biblical parables), the best short story writers have shown that a large world can exist in a small compass – and Petterson is one of the best. The most dramatic events are a fist fight between Arvid's father and uncle, grandfather's funeral and the destruction of an old, decaying barn. But these events are bigger than they seem – like practically everything in the book.

The fight between the adult brothers arises from their frustration at the shrinking world they live in. Arvid's father has lost his job in a shoe factory, where, as Arvid sees it, there is room for innovation and thought: “There was a lot to say about [shoes]. Gym shoes, smart shoes, ladies' shoes, children's shoes, ski boots, riding boots. Dad talked a lot about shoes, and he knew what he was talking about. But now it was over.”

Like a little death. Dad would have to join Uncle Rolf in the toothbrush factory, and toothbrushes were much less interesting.

Grandfather's funeral, described in “The Black Car”, the longest story in the book, is rich in symbolic detail. Now father and uncle were both fatherless and father, in particular, stumbled at the graveside.

But as the adult's lives shrink, Arvid's expands, in spite of himself. This is not an encouraging thing.

Clambering on a bookshelf, he reaches for the ceiling but in doing so knocks a clock from the wall. Time smashes into fragments, “the scattered cogwheels and the two clock hands wobbling round in the meaningless void”. Arvid is too young to see the significance of this image from his future, but the reader can provide it for him. In another story Arvid creeps into an old barn but hears workmen there, “and then he saw a strip of light widen and then he knew. It was the wall, they were tearing down the wall.” The rubbishy old things are passing, but there is a strip of new light.

As the stories progress, Arvid sees increasing signs of age in the adults who make up his life. The only thing mentioned from outside the village is deep with menace – the Cuba crisis and the threat of nuclear war. At

the thought of that, sensitive Arvid goes to bed and refuses to speak for four days – for what is the use if we are all to die soon? But the light continues to grow around him and to darken around the family he loves.

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### **Lauren says**

Set in 1960s Norway, we follow Arvid, a young boy, in his daily life with family and his school. Brief glimpses of larger issues (family dramas, world history and looming nuclear threat), but told through the simple eyes of a child. An endearing and short read.

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### **Russell George says**

This is the first of Per Peterson's novels – though this is probably the length of a novella – and it reminded me again that he does childhood very well. Particularly an experience of childhood shadowed by uneasy adults who drink too much, and all the foreboding that that situation brings. Again, there's no real story as such, but rather a series of episodes which gradually bring clarity to the family and the town they live in.

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### **Courtney says**

At times hilarious, at others desperately lonely, a lovely little book that proved a joy to read.

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### **Kimbofo says**

*Ashes in my Mouth, Sand in my Shoes*, first published in 1987, was Norwegian writer Per Petterson's first book, yet it was only translated in 2013. Like many other successful authors who write in languages that are not English, his books have been translated out of order. This means that for fans, like me, we have to read things out of chronological order. Not that it really matters: reading a Per Petterson novel is always a treat, regardless of when it was published, and this one is no exception.

The book, which is beautifully presented with French flaps and high-quality paper, comes in a small format paperback measuring 11.9cm x 16.6cm, making it perfect to fit in a handbag or, in my case, a bike bag. I toted it around with me for about a week and read a chapter each morning as I ate my breakfast having cycled 6.5 miles into work. It was the perfect way to start to the day.

*Ashes in my Mouth, Sand in my Shoes* tells the story of Arvid, a character who features strongly in Petterson's later novels, *In the Wake* (first published in 2000 and translated into English in 2007) and *I Curse the River of Time* (first published in 2008 but translated into English in 2010) and is said to be loosely based on Petterson himself.

In this debut novel, Arvid is a six-year-old boy living on the outskirts of Oslo in the 1960s. His world revolves largely around his working class parents — his Danish mother, who is a cleaner, and his father, a factory worker — his older sister Gry and his paternal uncle Rolf, who is a socialist.

Structured around 10 self-contained chapters, it reads a bit like a short story collection, but the unifying thread is Arvid's unique take on the world coupled with his inability to comprehend the adult situations around him. His childhood naivety is utterly endearing, but there are also moments when you realise his honesty may work against him.

To read the rest of my review, please visit my blog.

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### **The Book Girl (Andrea) says**

**"He held his hands to his face as if to keep his skin in place and for many nights he lay clutching his body, feeling time sweeping through it like little explosions. The palms of his hands were quivering and he tried to resist time and hold it back. But nothing helped, and with every pop, he felt himself getting older. he cried, and said to his mother: 'I don't want to get older. I want to stay like I am now! Six and a half, that's enough, isn't it?'"**

Ashes in My Mouth, Sand in My Shoes is a sweet little novella. This book gives us readers various snippets of the life of a boy named Arid, who lives with his parents in the country of Norway in the early 1960s. His father is a man who works in a shoe factory, while his mother is a Danish woman who works as a cleaner. This is life through the eyes of a sensitive and imaginative child.

The book is extremely insightful. Throughout the book, we get triumphs and lows. We learn that Arid wets his bed at night, and has nightmares but also that he is a little boy that is beginning to really piece his world together. He is learning to figure things out. I thought the stories in this book were insightful and poignant. The writing had such a beautiful prose and was super breathtaking.

I am super glad that I picked up this short little book at the library and gave it a read. I can't believe it was only recently translated into English. I will be purchasing a copy for myself to treasure forever. I hope you will check this book.

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