

# COMPANIONS

CHRISTINA HESSELHOLDT

Fitzcarraldo Editions

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Camilla, Charles, Alma, Edward, Alwilda and Kristian are a circle of friends hurtling through mid-life. Structured as a series of monologues jumping from one friend to the next, *Companions* follows their loves, ambitions, pains and anxieties as they age, fall sick, have affairs, grieve, host dinner parties and move between the Lake District, Berlin, Lisbon, Belgrade, Mozambique, New York and, of course, Denmark. In her first book to be translated into English, Christina Hesselholdt explores everyday life, the weight of the past and the difficulty of intimacy in a uniquely playful and experimental style. At once deeply comic and remarkably insightful, *Companions* is an exhilarating portrait of life in the twenty-first century.

## Companions Details

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Author : Christina Hesselholdt , Paul Russell Garrett (Translator)

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## From Reader Review Companions for online ebook

### World Literature Today says

"Danish novelist Christina Hesselholdt's narrative explores different types of love—romantic, filial, platonic—and the existential angst that these emotions cause. Time and again the theme of death is considered in the author's fragmented, intertextual, and postmodern writing." - Melissa Beck

This book was reviewed in the Mar/Apr 2018 issue of World Literature Today magazine. Read the full review by visiting our website:

<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/...>

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### Åsa Svensson says

Jag läste ut Sällskapet för några dagar sedan, och nu har vi pratat om den i min bokcirkel, men jag är nog inte riktigt färdig med att processa denna bok. Det händer inte så mycket i boken egentligen, men samtidigt händer allt. Livet.

Jag slits mellan att vara fascinerad av associationsbanorna hos karaktärerna, och av att var lite irriterad på den här formen av berättande.

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### Holly Pigache says

I was really disappointed with this book. Stream of consciousness/ monologue style aside, the constant use of brackets and extremely lengthy sentences meant it was hard to keep track of the characters' thoughts and what was happening. I felt like a 5 year old; reading words but with no comprehension of what was going on.

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### Erin Britton says

Excellent book. Full review available via Split Lip:

<http://www.splitlipmagazine.com/917-r...>

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### Marieinsweden says

Stream of consciousness och Virginia Woolf-ish. Särskilt förtjust i de delar där Alma följer i fotspåren av döda brittiska författare.

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## Paul Fulcher says

(Camilla)

-Når man er alene, risikerer man ingenting.

-Men er det helt sandt?

(Jeg talte med mig selv).

Agterudsejlet. Engelsk: marooned - o'erne som en skylle af vand over rælingen på skibet man nu kun aner i horisonten.

-Det er også noget værre noget, de har sviget dig alle sammen, sagde naboen, lige uden for min store have, hvor vi var mødtes, hvor jeg stod og græd.

-Min mor kan jo ikke gøre for hun er død, sagde jeg, og Charles - det er som det skal være, vi kunne ikke holde hinanden ud.

-Nå, så var det jo godt det samme.

...

[Camilla]

When you are alone you do risk nothing.

'But is that entirely true?'

(I was talking to myself).

Marooned – the o's like a spray of water over the railing of a ship that can now just be glimpsed on the horizon.

'That is just terrible, they have all failed you,' the neighbour said, right outside my large garden where we had met, where I stood crying.

'Of course my mum can't help that because she's dead,' I said, 'and Charles – it is as it should be, we couldn't put up with one another.'

'Well, then it's just as well.'

Fitzcarraldo Editions is a small independent UK publisher which “focuses on ambitious, imaginative and innovative writing, both in translation and in the English language”, something they have certainly achieved with heavyweight books such as Matthias Enard’s brilliant

Zone and Compass, as well as one of my books of 2016 Pond, the 2017 Republic of Consciousness Prize winner Counternarratives and the MBI longlisted Bricks and Mortar). In essay form they also are the UK publishers of Nobel Prize winning Svetlana Alexievich. And as a subscriber I also love the design of the books – distinctive blue paperbacks “with French flaps, using a custom serif typeface (called Fitzcarraldo)”.

Their latest, Companions, is another worthy addition. It tells the story of 6 close friends, originally 3 (childless) couples in their 40s, although they all separate, and then recombine into different pairings, before or during the novel: Camilla & Charles (the obvious joke is noted), Edward & Aldwilda (already separated when the book begins) and Alma & Kristian.

In Denmark, Companions was originally published as four separate novellas published at two-yearly intervals from 2008 to 2014 - Camilla and the Horse Camilla and the horse, Camilla and the Rest of the Party Camilla - og resten af selskabet, The Party Breaks Up Selskabet gör op and Marooned Agterudsejlet – but here they have been translated, by Paul Russell Garrett, and printed in one volume.

The influence of Virginia Woolf’s The Waves is explicitly acknowledged, and the story is narrated, mostly as monologues, by the six different voices of the companions as we follow their thoughts on their lives, on death, relationships, ageing and illness as well as on art. For, in particular, this is a book steeped in literature:

Camilla, a lecturer and writer, is per Alma, her friend since childhood, has a *voracious appetite for literature* and Alma herself is a published novelist (indeed later on she writes one of the stories that appears earlier in this novel), both women inspired by Camilla's mother (more of a mother to Alma than her own).

Alma accompanies Camilla on a literary pilgrimage to where Woolf lived, wrote and died and Alma, talking to the ageing custodian at Monk's House (<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/monk...>), who thinks that her books are 'lacking in plot', comments:

*He believes that first and foremost she was 'of significance' to feminism. I feel compelled to enlighten him and say that he is mistaken, she is one of the foremost literary innovators of the twentieth century.*

*'How so?' he asks, suddenly stern*

*'By means,' I reply, 'of her...' I hesitate, should I mention how she condenses time so a day becomes a lifetime? Should I mention the emphasis she places on the life of the consciousness and the exchange between the consciousness and the world., or how easy she makes time move both forward and backward? But It is her ability to compress and saturate that makes me happy. Where is Camilla? She would be able to answer.*

The influences of works by Iris Murdoch, Vladimir Nabakov, Lawrence Durrell and Thomas Bernhard are also explicit in the story, and others referenced or quoted also include (at least – I'm sure I missed several others): Roland Barthes, Wordsworth, Sylvia Plath, Colette, Coleridge (father and daughter), the Brontës, Herta Müller, Slavoj Žižek, Jean Genet, Horace McCoy, Nikolai Gogol, Jonathan Swift, VS Naipaul, Joan Didion, Thomas Beckett, Knut Hamsun, Bruno Schulz, TS Eliot, Hemingway, Mark Twain, Shakespeare, AA Milne, Gertrude Stein, Epicurus, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Guy de Maupassant; but also (this is not wholly high-browed) Enid Blyton, JK Rowling and even Alistair Maclean (*I loved him, when I was young. Oh, Ice Station Zebra*) a brutal scene from whose Puppet on a String Alma recalls when her in-laws form a close circle around her and her husband in the ritual dance at their traditional wedding.

Charles and Camilla live, as do the others, a bohemian lifestyle. They attend a German strip club together where Camilla tries to sell "her stallion, Prince Charles" to the women (hence the title of the first novella) to a Romanian prostitute. But first Camilla asks her for views on Herta Müller. Literary references are never far from Camilla's mind:

*[Camilla]*

*I had to go to Belgrade to give a couple of lectures, and Charles was unable to travel with me. I am a literary figure, but might have preferred to be an architect. I have a strong sense of space, I am touching my heart at this very moment. My hotel was red on the inside, Twin Peaks red; the receptionist was a legal practitioner. His life had not turned out as he had imagined. Unlike mine, he commented, referring to my visit to the institute as evidence. Though his current position, working as a receptionist for his younger brother – this was his brother's hotel – did give him the opportunity to put his law degree to use on occasion. For instance when he had to communicate with and show around the supervisory health authorities, 'because it demands an understanding of the law'. I wondered what it might be comparable to. Perhaps, for example, if a qualified house painter only used his qualification to buy paint for his own house, no, consider the opposite instead, how when her daughter lay dying in hospital, the author Joan Didion purchased surgical clothing and walked around the hospital ward wearing it, all the while offering sound advice to the doctors, until finally they told her that if she did not stop interfering with their treatment, they would have nothing more to do with her case, she would have to take over herself. That would be equivalent to a person, while a painter is working on their home, wearing white paint-stained clothes and standing on a ladder next*

*to him. Welcome to my labyrinth.*

And it is on another literary pilgrimage – this time to Wordsworth country – that Alma and Kristian's relationship starts to founder:

*[Alma]*

*That we that once existed, it no longer exists. How I loved that we. How it fulfilled me.*

*My husband was with me. He is tired of me never saying we any more, only I. But I forget to be mindful of that, and the next time I talk about a trip we went on, an experience we shared, I find myself saying I again.*

*He was with me on my ramble through the Lake District, and Dorothy Wordsworth had rambled through these hills just as much as her brother William had: on several occasions WW wrote poems based on her notes. But regardless of whether the event was witnessed in the company of Dorothy or was Dorothy's own unique experience, r always used the personal pronoun 'I' on his poems. For example, she was the first to see the daffodils, (hundreds of daffodils along a lake) and her description formed the basis for what must be his most famous poem of all, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.'*

Kristian on the same journey visits Rydal Mount, the Wordsworth family home, and comments on the Joseph Wright painting made from 'The Grot', a summerhouse designed for viewing a waterfall:

*Perhaps the water was so tame because the moment it was selected as a motif it was cultivated ... I realised that the essence of art is to force a particular way of viewing upon other.*

In the second novella, Charles back problems become crippling, and he is bedridden, the party referred to in the title being the gatherings they increasing make around his bed. Alma comments on the group:

*[Alma]*

*She (Aldwilda) is the only one of us who does not want anything other than what she already has. As far as I know.*

*Kristian wants a child. Charles wants a new back. I want a wife without heating pads, where I write like I played the piano, flip page after page until suddenly I have pumped out an entire book. Camilla wishes her mind did not resemble greasy dishwater, or how does she describe it: like a bag filled with slips of paper, you stick your hand in and pull one out: Guilt, it reads. Defensiveness. Bitterness. The need to blame.*

*But all of this I am unable to recognise - in Camilla.*

Missing from this particular occasion is Edward, separated from Mathilda, and mourning his parents, his thoughts recorded in a mourning diary (the echo of Barthes is later noted):

*[Edward]*

*People with the need for order and perhaps also a belief in progress have invented the concept of stages of grief; here I imagine a system of locks. As though the person in mourning was a boat on a river, the river of sorrow, you might say, full of locks that ease the person ahead, and further ahead, towards the open sea, the reconciliation with death and loss where a new future is possible.*

*I am the kind of man who lives in a death house. Literally. I moved into my parents' home when they passed away. Joint suicide. They loved to demonstrate their rock-hard realism whenever possible. Their realist and Socratic position, I would say. Life as an illness. Goodbye and thank you, we're slipping away now. While we can still do it ourselves. Very considerate. Nonetheless a shock. For a long time. Death by hanging. Whoever had to kick out the chair from the other then had to kick out their own chair. It was probably my mum. I was a child of older parents. I am now the same age as my mum was when she gave birth to me. Forty five. I was ashamed of their sagging faces when they turned up at school among the crowd of athletic activist parents, primarily young parents. There were a few with potbellies. I did not change the house much. Once in a while I go down to the rec room, a monument to the seventies; if you put your ear to the wall, you can hear the faint echo of Abba; I take a seat by the dark, wooden bar and grab a glass (I suppose I am lonely), or I continue my losing battle with the billiard table, just a couple of shots. Thirty years ago, we used to kiss down here. With the old folks pacing nervously back and forth in the room above. And once in a while they would poke their heads down to make sure nobody got pregnant. I remember seeing my dad standing in the doorway once when I was crawling on the floor drinking Bacardi from the bottle; he pretended not to see me and shut the door behind him. Then everyone drove off on their mopeds and it was over. Someone had thrown up in the hedge. It is a terraced house, meaning the neighbour woke up to find white garlands hanging from their side of the hedge.*

[...]

*I never realised how much it helped them that they had each other. The more disabilities that turned up, the less so, I think. Their pains isolated them from one another, I think. I have no idea how they got up on the chairs, she with her osteoporosis and a compression fracture in the spine, he with his Scheuerman's, the failed operation on his herniated disk, the numb leg that he had to drag around; how did they even get up there; one final, caring, joint endeavour, or did he snap at her even in that situation?*

The third novella, has the 'party' but also various of the relationships, breaking up and spouses increasingly replaced by animal and other companions: Edward gets a dog, Camilla a literal horse [bringing the novel full circle]), Aldwilda a string of lovers, Alma gets Edward and Kristian decides (at least verbally) to head to Syria to join the conflict.

And by the fourth novel Camilla is marooned – as per the quote that opens my review - her beloved mother also dead, and separated from Charles. The title of this section is (I understand from Danish reviews) taken from Howard Pyle's painting Marooned:

Overall, an impressive work full of literature and life. My one reservation is that, having originally been issued a 4 novellas over 6 years, read back to back it becomes rather intense.

Excerpts:

<https://fitzcaraldoeditions.com/book...>

<https://granta.com/death-house/>

Some very helpful reviews:

<http://www.splitlipmagazine.com/917-r...>

<https://thebookbindersdaughter.com/20...>

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## **Andres says**

This is a **truly fascinating book**. I found parts of it brilliant and I **laughed several times** at the over-the-top eccentric characters and their weird anecdotes and puzzling trains of thought.

However, **the book does not have a conventional plot** (this is addressed by one of the book's main characters who in one scene condescendingly tells a museum attendant that in modern novels normally it does not happen that much) and to be honest, **I barely made it through the whole book**.

I was deeply frustrated by the characters' numerous and lengthy inner conversations about literature, authorship, Virginia Woolf and other authors. I suspect that **to truly appreciate this book, you should be well-versed on modern literature in general and on Virginia Woolf in particular**. If you are, and if you are not bothered by the lack of a conventional plot, you should definitely read it!

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## **Brittany says**

What a beautiful, meandering and literary stroll through contemporary adult friendships! The way this book honestly deals with loss, love and death is lovely. The way that literary and poetic moments are woven throughout the character's lives is lovely. If you enjoy Virginia Woolf, this one is for you. (Or if you enjoy Knausgaard. Or Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*.) Overall, I immensely enjoyed this book and can't wait to read more Hesselholdt!

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## **Bert says**

Aaah, if I would have known, I'd have read 'The Waves' first...

<https://woordjes.wordpress.com/2018/0...>

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## **Nate says**

This book was just what I needed. So thoughtful and sad and smart and clever and in love with books. Rich friendships over time (particularly between Alma and Camilla)...comparisons to *A Little Life* (but less queer and horrific) and the Neapolitan Novels (but less of a soap opera). Packed a deeper punch for me.

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## **Tommi says**

Ambivalent feelings about this one. There is nothing wrong with it really and some parts I really enjoyed, but I never felt myself truly invested in the stories of these companions. The author is clearly erudite (maybe to the point of annoyance – near-constant namedropping) and I do appreciate the effort taken to evoke a sense of *The Waves*, one of the greatest novels of all time. Hopefully I'll have more positive thoughts regarding next year's *Vivian*!

