

Karen Blixen (1885-1962)



Karen Blixen (1885-1962), also known by her pseudonym, Isak Dinesen, is famous for her memoirs, *Out of Africa*, and for several works of fiction, including *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934) and *Winter's Tales* (1942). A 2007 poll of opinion in her native Denmark lists Karen Blixen as one of the most representative personalities in Danish history. She was several times nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. She wrote in English, after living on a coffee farm in Kenya from 1914 to 1931.

Karen Blixen's father Wilhelm Dinesen, a retired soldier from a wealthy family, had written books of essays on hunting. Her mother Ingeborg Westenholz came from a family of ship-owners. Both parents grew up on country estates on the Danish peninsula of Jutland. The Dinesens were connected to the royal circle, although not titled. The crusading Westenholzes often involved themselves in politics. Scholars have noted the differences between the families, but have failed to note their similarities: both families shared strong opinions on cultural ethics, and both cared little for high society. Wilhelm Dinesen's father A. W. Dinesen wrote an article critical of the French wars in North Africa. Ingeborg Westenholz's brother, Aage, and sister, Mary Bess, were both subjects of newspaper scrutiny for their political activism, as was Karen Blixen's sister Ea.

¹ "Karen Blixen", *New World Encyclopedia*, www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Karen_Blixen

Ingeborg Westenholz Dinesen became the first woman in Denmark elected to a town council. Wilhelm Dinesen eventually won a seat in the Danish parliament. He committed suicide in 1895 (Karen was 10 years old) – reportedly because of syphilis, a disease he feared would lead to madness.

Her mother's family were strong Unitarians, in a country where the state religion was Lutheranism. No one, least of all Karen Blixen, has given her upbringing the credit it is due for her innovative approach to philosophy. She disapproved of any one-sided ideology. She appears to have consolidated her own beliefs from a variety of great works of literature, including the Old and New Testaments, but her fascination with fate was most influenced by her Scandinavian heritage.

She and her two sisters were educated at home, as was common for women of the wealthy class, while her two brothers went to school. She had written stories at an early age, the first of which were published when she was 22. She also studied art for a few years in Copenhagen, and her writing was influenced by her interest in painting. She grew up on a rural estate, where the differences between the peasant and upper classes made a deep impression on her. As *Out of Africa* reveals, she never lost her love for the peasants nor for the class system that existed in her youth.

Karen married her second cousin, Baron Bror Blixen of Sweden, thereby acquiring the title Baroness. Bror was the twin of the celebrated horseman, Hans von Blixen-Finecke, the man Karen was in love with in her youth. Bror himself wrote a book describing how he and his wife had set out to run a pioneer farm in Kenya. They divorced after eleven difficult years of marriage. She fought the divorce, and her *Letters from Africa* suggest that she loved her husband. Bror married again twice, but Karen did not remarry and never had children. Following their separation and divorce, she had a long affair with the safari hunter Denys Finch Hatton, son of a titled English family.

Due to the worldwide economic depression and miscalculations in pioneer farming, Karen Blixen's coffee farm, financed by her family, never turned a profit. She was homesick much of her time in Africa. Although she had her farm for nearly 18 years, she spent five years of that time in her beloved Denmark. In 1931, after losing the coffee farm in the Great Depression, Karen Blixen returned to Denmark and embarked on the writing career that lasted until her death in 1962.

Isak Dinesen first came to public attention in 1934 with her book *Seven Gothic Tales*. She was unable to find an interested publisher in England or Denmark, and was first published by Random House in the United States. From the beginning she was a mysterious figure; most readers thought she was a man.

The tales offered an existential flavor in archaic disguise. They seized the imagination of the American public, where the collection was issued by the Book of the Month Club. The era loved short stories, which appeared universally in popular magazines.

The prose in *Out of Africa* displayed an entirely different kind of writing from Isak Dinesen's first book. *Out of Africa* looked back with nostalgia upon her life as a settler on a coffee plantation in Kenya. It presented a lyrical depiction of life on a colonial farm, with deaths, drought, and disappointments--as well as great and tragic friendships. Isak Dinesen was among the first authors to describe Africans as individuals rather than as stereotypes.

Her memoir was arresting in many ways, especially in its oblique references to the author's love story with the English hunter Denys Finch Hatton. It left the reader tantalized by a series of enigmas: Who was the writer's husband, and what happened to him? Why didn't she and Finch Hatton marry? Did she ever plan to return to Africa? What was her life now? The answers to these questions remained private until after her death.²

² **Karen Blixen - Isak Dinesen: Information Site, www.karenblixen.com**

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