



Book Review of Isak Dinesen's *Winter's Tales*

(Updated from my July 26, 1993 book review for Drew's Bookstore newsletter.)

I'd like to suggest a collection of short stories *Winter's Tales* by Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen). Dinesen's fiction was received with enthusiasm by an American public up until her death in 1962; since then, it appears, her work has fallen into semi-obscurity.

Attention was drawn again to her autobiographical writings when Sydney Pollack's Academy Award-winning movie, *Out of Africa*, hit the theaters in 1985. However, the movie is problematic and has its limitations. Dinesen's life (often portrayed inaccurately in the movie) is made to overshadow her work, an occurrence that is common as well in critical studies of Dinesen. Therefore, interested readers should take a look at her fiction, stories that fit well into today's times (the sign of a classic) because of the interest in otherworldly subjects, such as vampires and werewolves, as in the *Twilight* series, and could be academically categorized "post-modern."

If you enjoy Carson McCullers' work, you will love Dinesen's. McCullers was a great admirer of Dinesen's stories—both women worked within the Gothic form. Readers who love a tale, one that is mesmerizing when told aloud, and/or who have an interest in the poetic, freakish, grotesque, or fantastic will find *Winter's Tales* a satisfying read. Dinesen's stories can be described as realistic with an otherworldly, historic feel. In this collection, most of her stories are set in some distant past, often in Denmark, her home.

"The Dreaming Child," one of the best tales in this collection, revolves around Jens, a spirited, parentless boy, who comes to live with the wealthy Emilie and Jakob Vandamm, two cousins who married to keep money in the family and, by Emilie's choice, are childless. Jens had been living in a poor district under the care of a bitter and mean-spirited woman, Mrs. Mahler, but he always dreamed of the day when he would "move up" into his "real" home where, (as he told all of his school friends), his parents were aristocrats. Upon first meeting Emilie he says, "Mamma...I am so glad that you have found me. I have waited for you for so long, so long" (169).

The reader knows that Jens is no ordinary child. Dinesen writes, "Jens took possession of the mansion in Bredgade, and brought it to submission, neither by might nor by power, but in the quality of that fascinating and irresistible personage, perhaps the most fascinating and irresistible in the whole world: the dreamer whose dreams come true" (171). The story continues to reveal Jens' powers, however bizarre, that enable him to hold up a mirror to others' selves and reveal the "truth" in their hearts; he uncovers Emilie's long-buried, passionate self and instigates a spiritual change in her life, albeit, one that the rational reader might not see as "real" or "true," but certainly is true for the characters.