

Author Karl Ove Knausgaard comes from a family where secrets are closely guarded. So what motivated him to write a series of novels about his life?

BY MARK DAPIN

THERE'S SOMETHING OF THE STORM about the phenomenally popular Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard, 45, a breath of the winter's wind. It blows in tempest, churning up his life, through the betrayals he admits and the alleged rape he denies. Its icy teeth bite his skin where he deliberately cut his face with broken glass. Its squalls blow behind his eyes while he talks of his self-hatred, public loathing, misanthropy and despair with bleak, Arctic passion.

On the other hand, he's a pretty funny guy.

Knausgaard's series of six autobiographical novels – collectively entitled *Min Kamp* or *My Struggle* after the memoirs of Adolph Hitler – has sold 450,000 volumes in Norway, a country of only 5 million.

"It's impossible to sell one more copy in Norway," he says. "One more article about me and they will vomit."

There has been a great deal written about Knausgaard in the Scandinavian press. He was an admired writer of literary fiction, the only first-time author to have won the Norwegian Critics' Prize for Literature for his debut novel, when the first of his *My Struggle* books, *A Death in the Family*, was released in 2009.

A Death in the Family isn't a memoir but Knausgaard calls it a "dramatised version of true events". It describes the slow and disgusting death of his bullying alcoholic father, and Knausgaard's own awkward, fearful adolescence. Even if it doesn't stick to the facts, it reads like the most perfect truth, because Knausgaard is a brilliant writer. *The Economist* recently called him "Scandinavia's Proust".

Knausgaard's father died in Knausgaard's grandmother's home and, in *A Death in the Family*, the author describes what he found when he came to clean up the house: "Dad's huge TV was in the middle of the floor and two of the large leather chairs had been dragged in front of it. A little table swimming with bottles, glasses, pouches of tobacco and overflowing ashtrays stood between them ... I could see two pairs of trousers and a jacket, some underpants and socks ... There was excrement on the sofa, smeared and in lumps. I bent down over the clothes. They were also covered with excrement. The varnish on the floor had been eaten away, leaving large irregular stains. By pee?"

Knausgaard's family – quiet people from a taciturn culture where secrets are closely held – responded to the book with "rage", he says. They went to the papers and denied everything.

THE SIX NOVELS

"They were really, really, really angry – as angry as it's possible to get," Knausgaard says. "They didn't want the story of my father out, and the grandmother. They said, 'This is not true. The father didn't die this way. He wasn't an alcoholic. He died peacefully. This is just lies.' I can understand that. Nobody wants those details to be publicly known."

Although he claimed *A Death in the Family* for fiction, he had originally written it using the real names of his relatives, and only changed some on his publisher's advice.

"They said, 'You can't use the name of your father,'" says Knausgaard. "So I didn't. I called him only 'dad' or 'father' or 'him'. But there's only one family in Norway with my name, so that was idiotic anyway."

Knausgaard says the fallout was "really like hell, because I felt so guilty but at the same time I had to write". The plan was for the six books to come out over two years, and he would still be writing the final volumes while the first were on sale. So despite all the pain he was causing himself and others – which, he says, he'd barely anticipated, since he hadn't thought the books would sell – he was compelled to carry on.

"There was hysteria in the Norwegian press," he says. "It was on the front page day in and day out. I cut my hair, and it was one page in the biggest paper in Norway. They tried to interview every person from my life. It became much more than a book, it was a phenomenon, which everybody kind of was involved in."

But that particular storm has passed.

"I said yes to one TV talk show and then it stopped," he says. "Because, I think, I was turned into some kind of ruthless demon, but they saw he's cool and he's talking about it and he's nothing dangerous."

He was living in Sweden when the book was released, and only became aware of the strength of the gale once it had blown over. But when he returned to Norway and went out to a bar, angry strangers wanted to tear him to pieces. "Some of them are very provoked by me," he says. "That's how it is if your face is everywhere. People see your face and they think, 'F--- you. It should've been me.'"

KNAUSGAARD IS 193CM TALL, WITH LONG HAIR AND A beard, like Thor the god of thunder. He's imposing and he talks tough – tough on himself, and the people around him – but he's never been in a fight. He says he was head-butted once, taken by surprise when he was young, but that's all. He meets me from the railway station in Ystad, a pretty town in southern Sweden, and he is extremely polite and solicitous. His small hesitations with English, in which he searches for the correct words to express his alienation, are charming.

He lives in a small rural community 15 minutes' drive from Ystad. "I'm not a social person," he says, "and there's no social demands here whatsoever."

Knausgaard has invited me to stay at his home, in one of three single-storey buildings arranged in a horseshoe, in traditional southern Swedish style, as protection against the wind from the Baltic Sea. One of the buildings is the family home, another houses Knausgaard's writing room and library, and the third is, temporarily, a guest house. He lives with his second wife, Linda, and their four children. Their oldest child is 10, the youngest a newborn.

Knausgaard and I sit together in the writing house, as he smokes one Chesterfield cigarette after another, and we both chain-drink warm cans of Diet Pepsi, and settle comfortably into talking about how uncomfort-

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able Knausgaard feels about talking to people.

He dates his discomposure back to his teenage years. “When I reached puberty, it was like I ran into a wall,” he says. “I became very shy and very, very restricted. And that’s the one thing that stuck with me: having problems in social situations, meeting new people. It’s like I’ve been too self-conscious for my own good – and I have a talent for shame. I’m very easily ashamed.”

He has had periods of very heavy drinking but, he says, he hardly touches alcohol anymore. The talk repeatedly returns to his father, a schoolteacher.

“I was afraid of him,” he says. “He was a chaotic person, and very angry” but also “very strict”, forcing an order onto his own life and those around him.

“I didn’t really relate to him in an adult sense until after he was dead,” says Knausgaard. “It surprised me that I cried so much when he died. I wanted him dead. At the same time as I was crying, I was still happy that he was dead. It would’ve been a nightmare if he was alive now – and I never would’ve wrote those books, if he was alive. But I still think maybe there is a life after death and maybe he will wait for me and that will be ... awful. Meeting him again down there. And I dream about him: dream about him knowing that I wrote those books about him, and he’s very angry. I wake up frightened, like I was when I was a kid.”

Those are confronting and eviscerating things to say, but it’s somehow difficult not to laugh, because Knausgaard has lovely, understated comic timing, which comes through in his writing as easily as his conversation. Sections of *A Death in the Family* are difficult to enjoy because they are so intense and personal. But there is a scene in which a teenage Knausgaard and his appalling rock band approach their first disastrous gig in a suburban shopping mall in Norway and, Knausgaard writes, “Something about it reminded me of the Beatles concert on the roof of the Apple Building in 1970.” That’s the funniest line I’ve read in a Scandinavian novel.

But there have been stretches of Knausgaard’s life which cannot be leavened by humour. He was first married at 25 years old, to a woman named Tonje. He was unfaithful once, on a drunken night in the home of another author, with a stranger he never saw again.

“I was filled with guilt for a year,” he says, “and I thought it was over, and then the worst thing imaginable happened. One year after, there was a phone call. He called my wife and said, ‘I want to talk to the rapist, Karl Ove.’ And Tonje just gave me the phone. She stood listening to the conversation I had, and she was completely white because they accused me of rape. And that was very difficult to deal with. Tonje said, ‘I believe you, I don’t care about the raping thing, but you have been unfaithful.’ Then I went away for some months, writing, then we went back together and she was unfaithful – as a kind of revenge, I think – and then I just moved to Sweden. I wanted to go away. And I’m so ... like a coward. I don’t say to someone, ‘I want to divorce you.’ I just wait and wait until there’s an opportunity: ‘Okay, you’ve been unfaithful, I’ll leave.’ That’s the easy way out.”

His accuser, he says, was “a kind of criminal” but he’s dead now. Knausgaard tried to arrange to meet both him and the woman, but they didn’t show up. They



A LIFE EXPOSED: Karl Ove Knausgaard’s series of six novels is collectively entitled *Min Kamp*, after the memoirs of Adolph Hitler. One of the volumes includes a 400-page essay of Hitler, which focuses on the dictator’s lesser-known traits.

attempted something similar with another man, and the case went to court. Knausgaard was asked to testify but refused “because of the publicity I would create”.

As for what happened that night, he says, “I hardly remember nothing, because I was so extremely pissed.”

HE MET HIS SECOND WIFE, LINDA, also a writer, at a seminar for first-time authors.

“I fell in love immediately,” he says. “I got drunk and said to her, ‘I can follow you everywhere. Let’s just go away. I’ll divorce and I want to be with you.’ She said, ‘No, your friend is interesting.’ And she got together with him.”

Linda suffers from manic depression.

“She was being manic at that period,” Knausgaard says. “She had this wild energy, and the next time I met her she was depressed and she looked like she was torn to pieces.” When Linda rejected him, Knausgaard cut his face. “It was just glass and blood,” he says. “It looked terrible. I just lost control over myself. It was an act of self-hatred ... a feminine thing to do. It’s girls who cut themselves. A man should take the anger and get it out, and not turn it inward.”

Knausgaard was divorced in 2002, he and Linda eventually married, and her depression disappeared for seven years – until she read Knausgaard’s loving but clinical portrayal of their lives in his books, and fell into the darkness again. Linda is a quiet presence in their home, nursing the baby. Knausgaard says he doesn’t think she is happy in the country, but they stay because it’s a good life for the kids.

It was only once he’d grown up and had children of his own that Knausgaard could relate to his late father in an adult way. He says he loves his children furiously. “It’s the best thing in my life, that family. And I’ve given them away. They’re in a book, which could be problematic when they’re in their teens, but we’ll see. Their persons are kind of innocent in the book.

“I didn’t think about the consequences. I was very frustrated and angry. I just worked. But it’s not the end of the world, being in a novel – okay, it is problematic for them, realising that everybody knows about us, but

there is a lot more to us than those books.”

Knausgaard insists he doesn’t have friends, doesn’t drink and never goes out, so I’m mildly taken aback when he invites me to come out for a drink with his best mate, Geir Angell Øygarden, who recently moved in down the road. Øygarden appears in the second volume of *Min Kamp*, *A Man in Love*.

“He’s like the devil,” says Knausgaard. “He says the things you shouldn’t say. When I’m in turmoil, he says, ‘You should just go and f--- everybody you want. Why not?’ Things that just open everything up.”

Øygarden is a compact, amiable, fit-looking fellow with a pleasing turn of phrase. Knausgaard drives the three of us out to a small hotel, which has a bar but neither customers nor staff. Øygarden puts a Frank Sinatra record on the non-ironic Wurlitzer jukebox, and we sit together with fine, dark Swedish beer as Øygarden tells the long and fascinating story of how he went to Baghdad at the start of the Second Gulf War as a fake human shield. He infiltrated the real human shields by inventing a background for himself as a veteran Norwegian peace activist, and stayed with them until US troops rolled into the capital, whereupon he introduced himself to their commander, said he wasn’t really a human shield but a sociologist studying people under pressure, and spent two months embedded with the US Army. And what did he learn about people under pressure?

“Not very much, really,” he says.

Knausgaard doesn’t say much in the bar, content to listen to Øygarden win over the visitor, but he participates enthusiastically when the needle on the jukebox gets stuck on the Beatles’ *Hey Jude*. It’s bracing for me to watch two obviously brilliant men attempt to mend a jukebox, employing the technical savvy of a brown bear and the subtlety of a moose. When turning the machine on and off doesn’t work, they try pressing all the buttons at once. When this fails, they simply repeat their mistakes, in the same order. In the end, the bar-woman appears and solves the problem.

THE NEXT MORNING, BACK IN THE WRITER’S COTTAGE, I put it to Knausgaard that he actually does have friends. “Geir has said, ‘Your image of yourself is so false,’” says Knausgaard. “I have maybe three good friends, and that’s more than enough for me.” One very good way not to make friends is by calling your books *Min Kamp*. Why did Knausgaard do that?

“It’s a way of saying ‘F--- you. I don’t care,’” he says.

Both he and Øygarden seem very interested in the Nazis, and Knausgaard says a later volume of his sextet, not yet translated into English, includes a 400-page essay on Hitler, which seems to concentrate on some of the genocidal dictator’s lesser-known traits, such as his abilities as a mimic.

There’s something of the punk rocker about Knausgaard, from the self-mutilation through the studied alienation and independent publishing to the imbecilically provocative appropriation of the Nazi lexicon. The music in his car is a compilation of The Clash’s greatest hits, and he keeps a guitar and drum-kit in his writing room, behind his chair.

“It’s in my bones,” Knausgaard says, “being uncommercial, not compromising.”

For Knausgaard, the storm is the thing: the hot front of creative fury, the drenching rage of isolation, and the heavy clouds of grief. But, every now and then, there seems a wink of self-parody, when the ire appears cartoonish and the sadness a thirsty joke. And I wonder – just a tiny bit – if his second most brilliant creation isn’t his own public persona and if, like the Sex Pistols, he isn’t stringing us all along. ■

Boyhood Island, the third in Karl Ove Knausgaard’s sextet, has just been released by Random House.