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Summer 1978. A young boy disappears without a trace from a summer cabin. His mother claims that he was carried away by a giant. He is never found.

Twenty-five years later, another child goes missing. This time there's a lead, a single photograph taken by Susso Myren. She has devoted her life to the search for trolls, legendary giants known as *stallo* who can control human thoughts and assume animal form. Convinced that trolls are real, she follows the trail of missing children to northern Sweden. But humans, some part stallo themselves, have been watching over the creatures for generations, and this hidden society of protectors won't hesitate to close its deadly ranks.

Stallo Details

Date : Published November 2012 by Albert Bonniers Förlag (first published 2012)

ISBN :

Author : Stefan Spjut

Format : Hardcover 592 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Horror, Fiction, Mystery, European Literature, Swedish Literature, Thriller

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From Reader Review Stallo for online ebook

Andrew Kelly says

Touted as a horror book, it disappoints. The pace of the story builds nicely and is structured around a road trip and a search for answers. I enjoyed the way the author creates the atmosphere of a Swedish winter, the people functional and somewhat stoic. The hype on the cover peaked my interest, but the story, sadly, failed to deliver the drama, horror and pace I was hoping for. Just gets an "Ok" from me.

Ken Fredette says

I really like the story very much. It was done so that all the characters finally knew what they were faced with. The ending was anything but.

Blair says

A 'haunting supernatural thriller' translated from Swedish, *Stallo* traces the connections between two events: the disappearance of a boy from a woodland cabin in 1978, and the possible sighting of a troll in a small town, 25 years later. The latter is investigated by Susso, the creator of a website dedicated to supposedly mythical beings: her father, a wildlife photographer, once took a picture of a strange creature which has entered family lore and sparked her obsession. With her mother Gudrun and ex-boyfriend Torbjörn in tow, Susso sets off on what turns out to be an epic adventure - apparently traversing the entirety of Sweden - to chase down the truth about the 'troll', a mission that suddenly becomes crucial when another boy goes missing in the town where it was spotted. Another narrative follows a man called Seved, although it's rather difficult to discuss the details of his part of the story without giving away exactly where it goes.

While very intrigued by the themes and the whole idea of this story, I'm afraid I found it rather a hard slog. *Stallo* suffers from the simple fact that it lays its cards on the table way too early: (view spoiler) There are also so *many* characters it's difficult to keep them straight. Aside from Seved, Signe and Mattias, I have to admit I had no clue who anyone in the troll house was. And don't get me started on the amount of different names/words/phrases used to describe the various magical creatures; even by the end of the book I wasn't sure if they were all the same thing or several different 'species'. On the plus side, I did find the structure of the book enjoyable, with the main trio chasing clues, travelling from place to place meeting different people who help them, etc - it's old-fashioned and curiously reassuring. And I liked Susso and Gudrun: they were surprisingly ordinary heroines for this sort of novel.

I never feel very confident in talking about the quality of the translation in a translated novel, because unless I can also read it in the original language, how would I know which one is at fault? But the cover of this edition is plastered with a big quote from Karl Ove Knausgård about how the 'words seem to sparkle on the page', so I kind of feel like it probably *is* the translation that's the problem here. Far from being sparkling, the writing seems dull and turgid and adds to the feeling that the story is dragging on for too long. In places, it just seems plain wrong, or at least odd - the word 'object' repeatedly being used to refer to an animal particularly stood out to me.

I don't know if it's because most Scandinavian books I've read have been part of some series or another, but - despite its length - *Stallo* feels like it's the beginning of something, not necessarily a complete story in itself.

There's a moment of sexual tension between Susso and Torbjörn that's never revisited, and the ending is very abrupt. I wonder if there'll be a second Susso investigation? I'm not sure I'd be interested in picking it up if there was. This was at least engaging and readable enough that I stuck with it for 600 pages, but all in all I think it's one of those books that tries to bridge the boundaries between literary and fantasy/horror fiction and ends up not being very good at either of them.

4cats says

Finally finished! I loved the opening of this, and throughout there were moments of this is good but it felt overly long and I must admit I got bored. There wasn't enough action or horror, there is a scene which isn't pleasant reading (but I won't say which, so as not to spoil it). It wasn't bad enough for me to stop reading but I felt it needed to be shorter.

To add to the above.....

This is one of those novels which starts strongly but burns itself out and just doesn't deliver. It flickers into life for moments but it doesn't sustain its' initial power. Touted as scandi-horror, dealing with the ancient ones (trolls and shapeshifters) who are protected by a group of Sami who do their bidding (you sort of find out why), but unfortunately by then I had lost my reason for reading.

Spinster says

After having read an excellent book about trolls just before Stallo, I was hoping for the same kind of excitement. Especially since it was a really long book. I mean, no one writes hundreds and hundreds of pages of nonsense, right? Yeah OK, they do, but I hoped it wouldn't be the case here. I was part right and part wrong.

The book started slowly and confusingly. There were a few different storylines and point of views (fortunately only a few!) and at first it was difficult to keep track of them all, especially Seved's. It got easier after a while, but the book never really picked up pace, it was rather like dragging your feet in heavy slush.

There was also a fuckload of pointless ramble. Not for pages at a time, but every short chapter would concentrate on something or other that was completely beside the point and gave the story no added depth or importance. In some cases it's a good way of making the characters or scene feel more lifelike, but overusing it is a bad idea. Especially when you could cut a few hundred pages from the length by deleting the rambling bits.

Possibly the weirdest thing for me was the fact that the only person I could even remotely relate to was Seved. (view spoiler) The rest of the characters (well, Seved included really) behaved and spoke in ways I couldn't really imagine anyone in real life doing. There was a lot of dysfunctional history between people, and even though that would have been interesting to read, those parts were more or less ignored.

I wasn't a huge fan of the troll angle. It wasn't a horrible idea, but I felt like it could have been spread and fleshed out a little more. There was potential, but I think in the end it just got too magicky for me. Me, who loves reading about magic and paranormal beings. I just didn't like how the book never really ended. There were far too many questions unanswered and ignored, too many threads left loose, so that the ending seemed unfinished. I'm still not convinced this book is "fantastic" as promised, so I'm giving it 2.5 stars.

Magdalena aka A Bookaholic Swede says

Stallo is a large human-like creature in the Sami folklore and since the book is about giants that kidnap children is the title quite logical. I listen to this book while working and since it's 600 page long was the book around 25 hours long to listen to. However, by accelerating the speed to max did I manage to finish it a bit faster. And, I had a pretty good reason to wanting to speed up the story. I have never before had the speed to max before, but it was the only way for me to finish the book. Not that it was bad. The story in itself was good. However, it could have easily been cut down around 200-300 page by just taking away all the tedious uninteresting stuff that had no bearing on the story. I mean as much as I like board games am I not that interested in listening to how some of the characters playing one on Christmas day. Or, when Susso at work etc. If I had read the book would I have skimmed a lot, unfortunately, I had to listen to most of it. It was just the last 100 pages or so that I read and that I was thankful for since I could finish the book quite fast.

As for the story, I found it intriguing, and I liked how the author manages to connect the story to John Bauer and Sven Jerring. And, the whole Stallo thing with the kidnapping of children reminded me of the tv-series Jordskott and it was one of the reasons why I wanted to read this book. I liked this book, I just didn't love this book and that's because the story would have needed to trim down a bit and making it more flowing. And, it's too bad since I liked finding a Swedish paranormal book about giants.

So, all and all, not a perfect book, but still interesting to read. I do recommend reading it, and not listening to it since you can skim the less interesting parts.

Read this review and others on A Bookaholic Swede

Kathy Cunningham says

This review is of the English translation of STALLO, called SHAPESHIFTERS:

Stefan Spjut's SHAPESHIFTERS is a creepy, atmospheric horror novel about Nordic mythological creatures in modern-day Sweden. In 1978, a little boy is carried off from a campground by something gigantic, but no one will believe his mother's story. Twenty-five years later, another child goes missing, and the only lead is a photograph taken by troll-hunter Susso Myren. The photo shows what appears to be a gnome-like creature, and the missing boy's grandmother insists the little man had been hanging around the house in the days before the boy's abduction. The story follows Susso's efforts to track down the truth about the so called "stallo," or shapeshifters, beings with supernatural powers and the uncanny ability to hide in plain sight. What happened to the two missing boys? And are the stories about trolls and gnomes simply folklore, or are these creatures really as much a part of our world as rabbits, bears, and squirrels?

Susso is an interesting character; she became intrigued with trolls when she was a young girl – her grandfather had supposedly photographed one, even though he was never able to prove the photo's authenticity. When Susso herself manages to photograph one, she feels responsible for unraveling the mystery, not only of the boy's disappearance, but of her grandfather's discovery. She has a website which catalogues the various troll sightings she has investigated, a website which eventually draws the attention of the very creatures she so longs to find. And Susso soon learns that the stallo have so woven themselves into the world around them – including the lives of the humans they have encountered – that it's impossible to separate them from the natural order of things. If SHAPESHIFTERS is a horror novel, it's one that draws its

horror from within, rather than from some external menace.

Those looking for a fast-paced, action-centered story will be disappointed in SHAPESHIFTERS. Spjut's style is both lyrical and descriptive, but it is not typical of the horror genre. The POV shifts from that of Susso to her mother Gudrun (who narrates some of the chapters) to Seved, a young man who seems to know more than he's letting on about trolls and shapeshifters. And the horror builds very, very slowly as Susso gets closer and closer to the truth she seeks, and Seved grows more and more uncomfortable with his own role among the stallo. Are these creatures really evil, destructive beasts from a darker time, or are they just trying to live in a rapidly changing world?

I enjoyed reading SHAPESHIFTERS, but I have to admit it dragged in places. This is a very long novel, and the length has more to do with the sheer amount of detail and description Spjut uses than it does the actual plot. It was an effort to get through the first third of the novel, before I really understood what was going on. But once the story developed and the characters became more familiar to me, I was definitely intrigued and invested in what would ultimately happen. And I liked the ending, which is a big thing for me – too many novels seem to fall apart in the final act. Not so this one. The ending was believable and satisfying, without ever feeling pat or easy.

The best thing about SHAPESHIFTERS is the way Spjut manages to make his mythological creatures seem as real and natural as the rest of the world. These are magical beings – they do have mental and physical powers that are inexplicable – but their magic seems so much a part of the Swedish wilderness that I never quite saw them as magical. I've never read anything quite like this.

Overall, if you have the patience for a story that builds slowly and centers more on setting and atmosphere than it does on action, then SHAPESHIFTERS is definitely worth a read. I do recommend it.

[Please note: I was provided a copy of this novel for review; the opinions expressed here are my own.]

Maja Kvendseth says

I read the Norwegian translation of this but could still "taste" the Swedish turns of the language (beautiful). "Stallo" is a Sami term for unnatural creatures and it fits very well with what this book is about. It's part crime story, part thriller, part socio-realism, and part supernatural horror. I can only describe the writing style as characteristically Scandinavian and a very interesting blend between the everyday, straightforward, and the poetic.

The plot ties nicely together but also leaves room for lots of questions that one can mull over afterwards if one is so inclined. (I am.) The main characters are believable, partly because they're not really especially smart, especially likeable, or especially capable. Apart from a couple of lucky turns that can indeed be written down to sheer luck, nobody does anything overly superheroic, so even with the supernatural elements the plot feels very real. Also, what I think of as the main character, is a realistically written woman - which is a significant plus for me. The book is dominated by male characters, but the plot is still driven largely by the women in it. It makes for a nice change.

What I was less keen on is, among other things, the lack of explanation on some of the background elements handled in the book. It took me a while to get into what the characters were on about at times, but after a while I got more comfortable with making guesses and waiting for more explanation. I also felt uncomfortable with parts of the ending, but I won't spoil it.

All in all a good read, exciting and at times terrifying. NB! Some gore - not necessarily for the faint of heart.

Wendy Wagner says

A slow burner but a very engaging tale. The supernatural creatures in this book--the stallo--are utterly believable and more than a bit creepy.

Anastasia Alén says

Well-developed plot around Staalos! Interesting book, Swedish noir filled with fantasy.

Jack Tripper says

There's a great, haunting 300-page story buried somewhere within--unfortunately there's another 300 pages of padding to wade through. I have nothing against epic-length works if the story demands it, and I love descriptive writing, but Spjut gets a bit excessive here, describing every mundane detail of the characters' lives, as well as every object within their general vicinity, and it breaks up the flow and the tension far too often to keep me totally captivated and engaged.

But hidden within the pages and pages of description, there's a pretty freaky story that mixes the everyday with the mythical. I'm not very good at skim-reading through parts that don't hold my interest--I force myself to read every single word--but for those who can, there's a decent supernatural thriller here that fans of Neil Gaiman's and Clive Barker's "hidden world"-type horror-fantasies may appreciate.

For me, while there were a few scenes that will most likely haunt me for a while (such as the eerie Prologue), it was just a bit too much work to get to "the good stuff," and I had to force myself to keep reading at times, though the ending made it all somewhat worth it. Barely.

2.5 Stars

Susanne Samuelsson says

Börjar fantastiskt bra, kanske en av de bästa inledningar jag läst, men sen kommer ordbajsandet. Det finns många ljusglimtar i den här boken men de dränks tyvärr ofta bland alla oviktiga detaljer, och storyn (som i sig är riktigt spännande)försvinner bland de alldeles för många sidorna. 592?! Hälften hade räckt. Ett stort plus för de noga utmejslade karaktärerna dock.

Maja Palm says

Kommer drömma om troll

Tanja Berg says

I was thinking of giving this two stars because it's not poorly written and in terms of technical elements it holds well enough together. However, the degree to which this book bored me far beyond anything else I have ever read in my entire life could not bring me beyond one star.

As with all books I hate, it's difficult to write a spoiler free review, so I'm not even going to try. It's not worth it. My intention is to be done writing about it as soon as possible and then quickly forget the hours (21,5) I have wasted listening to this. The book is at least 300 pages too long.

The premise itself is promising enough and the start, although slow, also held my interest. I had realized by 15% that this wasn't for me, but fool that I was I chose not to give up.

Children are disappearing, although not many nor often. They are being kidnapped by humans to keep trolls in check. These trolls are also shape-shifters, that is how they can hide so well. There is a terrible long, boring plot line connecting a boy that disappeared in 1978 or so with a newer kidnapping.

Every time I looked at my mp3 player I wanted to cry at how much of the story was left. I'm done now and I am not going to do this to myself anymore - if mp3 books are boring, they shall be abandoned. And YOU - take my advice and do NOT read this. You might find out that it's possible to die of boredom after all. I only barely survived.

Leah says

Weirdly wonderful...

In 1978, a small boy and his mother are staying in a holiday cabin in the forests near Falun, in Sweden. All seems well until the mother accidentally kills a bat that was flying around her. She throws it into the undergrowth, but the next day, when she goes to the fridge, there is the dead bat lying crumpled on a shelf. Now some of the forest animals begin to behave strangely, sitting motionless staring at the house. The mother tells the boy to stay in but he wants to see them, so he runs out of the house into the forest - and is never seen again. His distraught mother claims that she saw him being taken by a giant...

In the present day, Susso visits an elderly woman who claims she has seen a strange little man watching her house and her grandson. Susso believes in trolls and is on a personal mission to prove that they still exist. Most of the reports she receives via her website are obviously false or hoaxes, but something about this woman convinces her to investigate further. Elsewhere, Seved is busily clearing up the havoc caused by the Old Ones who live in the barn – a sure sign they are getting restless...

This is one of the weirdest books I've read in a long time – weirdly wonderful, that is. The world it is set in is undeniably the Sweden of today, but in some isolated places the creatures of myth and folklore still exist. It's essential that the reader can accept this, because there's no ambiguity about it, but Spjut's matter-of-fact way of writing about them somehow makes the whole thing feel completely credible. But although their existence is established he leaves them beautifully undefined – the reader is never quite sure what exactly they are or whether they are fundamentally good or evil or perhaps, like humanity, a bit of both. They're not all the same, either in appearance or behaviour, and there seems to be a kind of hierarchy amongst them. Although

most humans remain unaware of them, some are very closely involved with them. And every now and then, a child goes missing.

It's the writing that makes it work. Spjut builds up a chilling atmosphere, largely by never quite telling the reader exactly what's going on. Normally that would frustrate me wildly, but it works here because the reader is put in the same position of uncertainty as the humans. There's a folk-tale feel about the whole thing as if the fables of the old days have somehow strayed back into the real world. But despite that, fundamentally this is a crime novel with all the usual elements of an investigation into a missing child. As with so much Nordic fiction, the weather and landscape plays a huge role in creating an atmosphere of isolation – all those trees, and the snow, and the freezing cold.

There's a real air of horror running beneath the surface, though in fact there's not too much in the way of explicit gruesomeness – it's more the fear of not knowing what might happen. The beginning is decidedly creepy and sets up the tone for the rest of the book brilliantly. It takes a while to get to grips with who everyone is and how the various strands link, but gradually it all comes together. I admit there were bits in the middle that dragged slightly and felt a little repetitive at times, but the bulk of it kept me totally absorbed. And the last part is full of action building up to a really great ending that satisfies even though everything is far from being tied up neatly and tidily. So much is left unexplained, not in the way of careless loose ends, but more as if some things just are as they are and must be accepted.

If you can cope with the basic idea, then I do highly recommend this as something very different from the normal run of things. 4 stars for the writing, plus one for being one of the most original books I've read in a while – I do hope there's going to be a sequel...

NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

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