

Bille August's *A Fortunate Man*: A Danish tragedy

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Directed by Bille August; screenplay by August and Anders Frithiof August; based on the novel by Henrik Pontoppidan

A Fortunate Man is a nearly three-hour film directed by Bille August (*Pelle the Conqueror*), based on the novel by Danish writer and Nobel Prize winner Henrik Pontoppidan (1857–1943). Both the film, available on Netflix, and the book are well worth investigating.

Pontoppidan's lengthy, semi-autobiographical novel was published in eight volumes between 1898 and 1904. Its Danish title, *Lykke-Per* (*Lucky Per*), refers to the central character, Peter Andreas Sidenius, nicknamed Per, and his success and failure, or both (as in German, the Danish word for "lucky" also means "happy"). The title also apparently alludes to the Grimm Brothers' fairytale, *Lucky Hans* (*Hans im Glück*), about a young man who keeps trading one item after another for one of lesser value and ends up empty-handed, and relieved.

The novel has only recently been translated into English, as *Lucky Per* by Naomi Lebowitz and *A Fortunate Man* by Paul Larkin.

In August's film (originally broadcast in 2018–19 as a television miniseries in four episodes), Per Sidenius (Esbén Smed), a young man living in rural western Denmark in the 1880s or 1890s, learns he has been accepted to the College of Advanced Technology in Copenhagen. His father, a severe, authoritarian Lutheran minister, is outraged by Per's life decision. He demands his wayward son "turn away from the path of perdition." Per replies, "Apologize? Never!" He explains that he feels like "a stranger" and "a homeless person" in the terribly repressive household.

In Copenhagen, without a penny from his father, Per finds a room in a poor neighborhood and begins attending classes at the technological college. While still a student, he develops a grand scheme for transforming Denmark into a major European commercial and shipping power, through the construction of a system of canals and waterways that would connect the Baltic and the North Seas. Per envisions a great port in western Denmark, competing with Hamburg and other cities. He expounds on his project, which also involves harnessing the wind and ocean waves to create electricity, to everyone who will listen, including his waitress-girlfriend, Lisbeth (Sophie-Marie Jeppesen). In his grim spartan garret, Per builds a model of his plan for national-technological renovation, complete with towers and windmills.

The Salomons are a wealthy, worldly Jewish family in Copenhagen. Per deliberately sets about making the acquaintance of Ivan Salomon (Benjamin Kitter), the Salomon son who is looking for "people with ideas ... genius." Per impresses him with his scheme for Danish self-sufficiency and modernization. "You're a world conqueror," Ivan tells Per soon after they meet, and "a fortunate man."

The affable, unassuming Ivan introduces Per into the Salomons' household, headed by patriarch Phillip Salomon (Tommy Kenter). Per is entranced with the opulence and sophistication of the family's home and social circle—he has never encountered anything like it. Nor has he ever met anyone like Ivan's two sisters, the beautiful and flighty Nanny (Julie Christiansen) and the older, more reserved and intellectual Jakobe

(Katrine Greis-Rosenthal). Later, watching Per as he observes the two young women, their Uncle Delft remarks drily, "Money is a magnetic force."

Indeed, Per wastes no time becoming infatuated with Nanny. Other writers of the time, including Jack London (*Martin Eden*) and Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie, An American Tragedy*) called into question the notion that love was an emotion that simply and arbitrarily descended from heaven. In particular, as an aristocracy of wealth emerged, it was inevitable that a certain petty bourgeois or even working class type would be struck with the "golden life" and its golden girls and boys and set out to win them.

Per's opportunism is not attractive. When he dines with the Salomons at the restaurant where Lisbeth works, he implores the latter to pretend "we don't know each other." However, his attitude is not entirely cynical or self-serving. He switches his attention and affections to Jakobe after she speaks sincerely in favor of science and progress, which "eliminates differences between people" and contributes to "global brotherly understanding." As Per makes his new feelings known to Jakobe, he acknowledges that he feels "a bit inferior" in the face of "the open and free habits of your family," and that when he thinks of his childhood home, "there's always a feeling of shame and eeriness." Subsequently, he will tell Jakobe that, due to his wretched, psychologically stunted background, he sometimes feels like a "troll who crawled out of his hole to be with humans." The damage, in the long term, may prove irreparable.

For Jakobe, the relationship with Per allows her to express strong emotions and explore sexuality for the first time. She unexpectedly pursues him to where he is studying engineering projects in Austria, and they spend several passionate, blissful days together. However, even here, Per's painful inner conflicts reveal themselves. Discovering a primitive wooden crucifix stuck in the ground behind them on a hill in the countryside, Per hurls stones at it and curses Christ, in Nietzschean terms: "Look at his abject humility and how he exposes his misery. ... When has anyone ever spat their disgust in your face?"

Per's plan for Danish greatness is turned down by a "pig-headed, narrow-minded old fool" of a civil servant. No one can prevail upon Per to apologize or moderate his conduct. The consortium of powerful investors set up by Phillip Salomon to finance the project eventually dissolves. At the height of success, everything slips through Per's fingers, or rather he throws it all away.

When his mother dies in Copenhagen (to which she moved to be close to her children), Per accompanies her coffin back to rural Jutland, where he undergoes some type of religious or spiritual awakening—or deadening. ("Seeing these surroundings again has made an impression. It's overwhelming.") He ends his engagement to Jakobe (pregnant by this time, unbeknownst to him) and becomes engaged to Inger (Sara Viktoria Bjerregaard), the daughter of a local pastor. At one point, Per breaks down and begs forgiveness for "forsaking my mother and father."

It is impossible to discuss the film or novel seriously, without "giving

away” its conclusion. Per retreats to the countryside, but finds no happiness in simple family life either. In the end, he separates himself from his wife and children too, spending his remaining days on earth in utter isolation in bleak surroundings. In a final encounter with Jakobe, who has never married and runs a school for poor children in Copenhagen, Per explains, “I’ve felt alienated and rootless all my life. But out here, I’ve finally become conscious of who I am. In my ungodly solitude ... So now I feel liberated.”

Both the novel and film contain many remarkable features. August and his son and co-screenwriter, Anders August, have done a conscientious job of adapting and condensing Pontoppidan’s book. Inevitably, even in the production of a 162-minute work, the Augusts were obliged to cut away many characters and subplots, some of which are genuinely missed. Scenes of more plebeian Copenhagen life, including those set in the residence of “Senior Boatswain” and Madam Olufsen, where Per first rents a room, provide the novel with some of its humor and warmth.

Also eliminated is the critical consideration of Danish cultural life, including the appearance of various bohemian figures apparently based on artists of the time. In “Dr. Nathan,” Pontoppidan included a portrait of the famed Danish-Jewish critic and scholar, and champion of playwright Henrik Ibsen among others, Georg Brandes. Brandes is associated with the “Modern Breakthrough,” the rejection of romanticism and the emergence of naturalism (and an interest in Darwin and other figures) in Scandinavian literature and art in the late 19th century.

The film, like the novel, rightly makes the treatment of the Salomon family—or of the contrast between the Sidenius and Salomon families—one of its main concerns.

Jakobe experiences various anti-Semitic slights and bullying, some of which the Augusts retain. Pontoppidan includes in his novel a remarkable scene in which Jakobe, at a Berlin railway station, encounters (in the Larkin translation) “one of the small armies of outcast Russian Jews ... pushed through Germany before being shipped off to America.” Some “were almost naked; many had bloody bandages wrapped around their heads or hands. They all had a deathly demeanor, were exhausted and filthy, as if they had been wandering for an age in a desert of blistering heat and dust.” These are the victims of Russian pogroms, in regard to which the authorities had acted either with “indifference ... or even with ... outright collusion.”

A strongly humanistic attitude animates Pontoppidan’s work as a whole. In another sequence, in a small Silesian town, Jakobe, again, encounters a group of “mostly poor children—pallid and emaciated wretches.” She follows one boy home and finds out his circumstances, “the all too common tragedy of a family slaved to factory work. Both the man and his wife had to work at machines from sunrise to sunset and leave the children in the care of an often cruel fate.”

No doubt Jakobe and Ivan are the most appealing characters in both the novel and the August film.

Per remains a far more problematic figure, one is tempted to say, almost disastrously so.

P.M. Mitchell, in his 1979 study, *Henrik Pontoppidan*, points to the autobiographical elements in *A Fortunate Man*. Pontoppidan came from a long line of Lutheran clergymen (hence the awkwardly Latinized surname). One of sixteen children born to a cleric and his wife, the future novelist was the “least disposed ... to carry on the puritanically Protestant cultural tradition which was his spiritual inheritance.” Like his fictional creation, Pontoppidan broke away from his family and entered the Polytechnical Institute in Copenhagen. Unlike Per, however, he left college in order, eventually, to become a writer, increasingly “aware of the new currents to which Danish literature was subjected and which emanated to a large extent” from Brandes.

There is a great deal of fascinating material, much of it psychologically and dramatically authentic and telling, in *A Fortunate Man*. However, in a

comment this brief one truly has to hone in on the work’s appalling conclusion, Per’s deliberate self-obliteration in the remote countryside in the name of stripping himself of all illusions and attaining “self-knowledge.” Rarely does one encounter a work that so precipitously and unpleasantly falls off a cliff.

It should go without saying that objective social and cultural problems in Pontoppidan’s era and national conditions, the relatively underdeveloped state of Danish capitalism and its role in European society, the continued predominance of the petty bourgeoisie, played a critical role in this. Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov in *Ibsen, Petty Bourgeois Revolutionist* addressed questions along these lines in relation to the Norwegian playwright that are not directly applicable to Pontoppidan’s life and career, but certainly help shed light on some of the difficulties.

Of Ibsen, Plekhanov commented that the playwright’s “social environment” was “sufficiently developed” in terms of class relationships to produce a negative reaction to many aspects of life, “but it was not defined enough—because it was not developed enough—to arouse in him a definite longing for something ‘new.’ That is why he was not able to utter those magic words which bring to life a picture of the future.”

Mitchell writes, in his study of Pontoppidan, that, according to the Danish writer, there could be “no understanding of what is wrong with society ... until the individual looks deep into himself and gains a modicum of objectivity toward his own motivations and, consequently, his own actions.” *A Fortunate Man* “does depict one way for the individual to achieve peace of mind and intimates that any sweeping social change should begin with the individual. The real revolution must be won within the mind of each human being and not be superimposed by an outside force driven by ulterior motives.”

The “ultimate message” in the novel, writes Mitchell, “is not new: to thy own self be true,” and adds that in the book this theme “has no sense of banality or platitude.” We have different conceptions of the banal and platitudinous.

This reader found the concluding portion of *A Fortunate Man* simply appalling. Per, writes Pontoppidan, in his isolation and self-abnegation, now felt “a ghostly hand,” which was “nothing other than his own instinctive awareness that it was actually in seclusion and loneliness that his soul was most at home. Deep contemplation, sorrow and pain were the lodestars of his life’s journey.” He ends up living in “a forlorn and weather-beaten country, where even sheep struggle to find nourishment,” etc.

And this deliberate act of annihilating oneself is treated as the height of enlightenment and self-awareness! Horrible.

August and others speak about Per’s hubris and so on. The director suggested rather loosely in an interview that because Per is “so self-centred and self-obsessed, he reminds me of the modern selfie generation who can only think about themselves and asserting themselves. And what I like about this story is that Per, being so selfish, has to pay such a high price for that, eventually. It’s hard for him, but he cannot socialize with anybody; he has to isolate himself far away from other human beings. And I was wondering about the younger generation today, who are always on their iPhones and are obsessed with social media—what will happen to them, psychologically?”

The problem with Per is not his presumptuousness, but rather that it is mobilized in such a small cause, his own career and fantastical Danish “greatness.” In any case, one would prefer a human being who throws himself into things, even misguidedly and selfishly, to one who renounces everything “wicked” and lives like a hermit-saint out of the 6th century.

James Wood, in a 2019 *New Yorker* piece, suggested that perhaps Per’s renunciationism was “a false flag narrative” and that we should look instead at Jakobe, whose own sacrifice “takes her into the world, not away from it.” This at least is to be preferred to the conclusions of the

“Marxist” Frederic Jameson (in the *London Review of Books*), who pontificates that the novel’s project “turns out to be ... to modify our sense of what luck or happiness means” and that Per “has managed to get beyond success or failure.” What nonsense.

Jameson seems to be taking a long-delayed cue from Georg Lukacs in *The Theory of the Novel*, a “pre-Marxist” work, a murky and schematic study (as the author later conceded), first published in 1916. Lukacs remarked in that volume that “the movement of life [in *A Fortunate Man*] shows a definite and unmistakable progression toward the purity of a soul that has attained itself” and “that every refusal to seize a conquered piece of reality is really a victory, a step toward the conquest of a soul freed from illusions.” Again, this asceticism needs to be thoroughly rejected.

A Fortunate Man, book and film, offers large portions of fascinating social, historical and psychological life. Both are also deeply flawed.



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