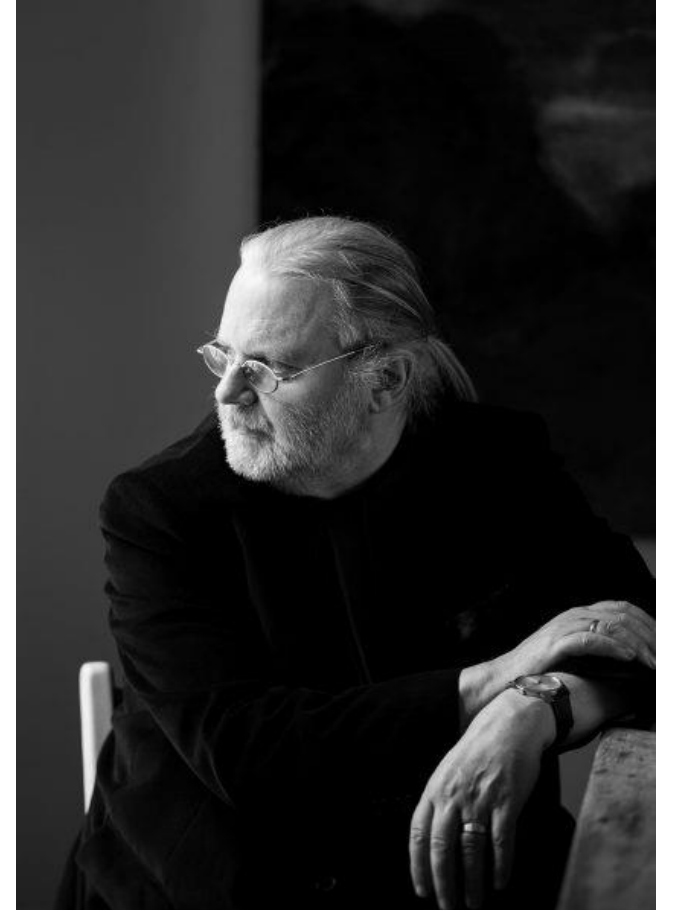


# **JON FOSSE, *THE OTHER NAME: SEPTOLOGY I-II***

Professor Tess Maginess



## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- Jon Fosse was born in 1959 on the west coast of Norway and is the recipient of countless prestigious prizes, both in his native Norway and abroad.
- Since his 1983 fiction debut, *Raudt, svart* [Red, Black], Fosse has written prose, poetry, essays, short stories, children's books, and over forty plays, with more than a thousand productions performed and translations into fifty languages.
- *The Other Name* is the first volume in *Septology*, his latest prose work, will be published in three volumes by Fitzcarraldo Editions.

## FOSSE IN CONVERSATION WITH CECILE SEINESS

Source: Cecilie Seiness, A conversation with Jon Fosse,  
Music & Literature, 10 October 2019  
(musicandliterature.org)

- ‘And in me there is a lot of **sorrow**. As Ibsen said: “I received the gift of sorrow, and then I became a poet.” Pain, sorrow, melancholia, and depression are a gift too. You can make something good out of them.’
- *Fosse was a **heavy drinker**, but gave up in 2012 after he collapsed. He converted to **Catholicism** that same year. And **got married** (again).*
- ‘I had severe delirium and alcohol poisoning. I have read that thirty percent of people die from it if they don’t get treatment. Thirty percent die with treatment.’



## FOSSE IN CONVERSATION WITH CECILE SEINESS

- ‘Yes, but it’s just as much about dying. In the novel, **alcohol is connected to death**. It’s also about the **self-destructive**. It follows on from a suicide. It’s the **ocean, death, and love**.’
- *Fosse felt the need to let the writing flow at its own pace, and he imagined writing what he describes as “**slow prose**,” that is to say, fiction that takes its time, is a bit **meandering and hypnotic**, and doesn’t rush from one thing to the next—prose that slowly turns or bends forward, with “transport stages” and “descriptions” and “reflections.”*
- ‘Everything I’ve written can perhaps be called a sort of **mystical realism**—not “magical,” but mystical.’

See also: [Jon Fosse \(Author of Andvake\)](#)  
([goodreads.com](#))





# BERGEN



# FOSSE'S BIRTHPLACE



Queen's University Belfast & University of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives"





## STRANDEBARM, WHERE JON FOSSE GREW UP

# BERGEN, BJORGVIN





Queen's University Belfast & University of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives"



Queen's University Belfast & University of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives"



Queen's University Belfast & University of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives"

## HARDANGERFJORD

- The **Hardangerfjord** (English: Hardanger Fjord) is the fifth longest fjord in the world, and the second longest fjord in Norway.
- It is located in Vestland county in the Hardanger region. The fjord stretches 179 kilometers (111 mi) from the Atlantic Ocean into the mountainous interior of Norway along the Hardangervidda plateau. The innermost point of the fjord reaches the town of Odda.

Source: [Hardangerfjord - Wikipedia](#)



Queen's University Belfast & University of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives"


## SUMMARY AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

### [Fosse: The Other Name | The Modern Novel](#)


- 'Fosse's **fusing of the commonplace and the existential**, together with his **dramatic forays into the past**, make for a relentlessly consuming work: already *Septology* feels momentous.' Catherine Taylor, *The Guardian*, 9 November, 2019.

### [The Other Name: Septology I-II by Jon Fosse review – a momentous project begins | Fiction in translation | The Guardian](#)



- 
- ‘*Septology* even **splinters from Beckett’s influence** in many ways—a Vladimir or Estragon would remain static, flailing in the absurd, clambering neither deeper into nor out of the void, while Asle seems determined to **strive toward salvation.**’ Spencer Ruchti, *Music & Literature*, 26 May, 2020.

[Jon Fosse’s \*The Other Name: Septology I-II\* — Music & Literature \(musicandliterature.org\)](https://musicandliterature.org)

- 
- ‘Who stole all the full stops from last year’s novels? The deserved Booker Prize winner *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo had only one **full stop** per chapter. Lucy Ellmann’s much-praised *Ducks, Newburyport* had just one in the narrator’s entire thousand-page monologue. Now Jon Fosse has gone one better – or worse – by **having none at all** in his new novel.
  - It all has a distinctly **Beckettian flavour**, which is no coincidence as Fosse, who was a productive playwright before becoming a novelist, wrote his first play *Someone is Going to Come* as a response to *Waiting for Godot*.’ John Self, *Irish Times*, 4 January, 2020.

[The Other Name: Hypnotic repetition – and no full stops \(irishtimes.com\)](https://www.irishtimes.com)

# READING THE OTHER NAME – SEPTOLOGY I-II

## Themes and concerns:

- Love
- Memory
- Free will and predestination
- Powerlessness, insignificance (Beckett)
- Death
- Art
- Faith

# FORM

- **'Plot'** – largely **internal** – what goes on in the heart, mind and soul of Asle.
- The novel is **'character driven'**, yet there is a great deal we do not know about the characters. **Only certain facets** are focused upon, repetitively.
- The novel draws upon the tradition of the **doppelganger novel**, e.g. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, but the relationship between the two Asles is **more ambiguous and raddling**. In his interview with Cecilia, he notes that Asles gradually split into two as he was writing the novel. We also have the younger and older Asle, another kind of doppelganger.
- **'Slow prose'** – how is that defined? Pace, rhythm?
- *Fosse has on several occasions described himself as a **poet at heart**. He is a poet in everything he writes. For Fosse, the **rhythm of a sentence is paramount**; form and content are not separate, they are entwined and should have the same impact on the reader.*
- **Characters** are often **in motion**.

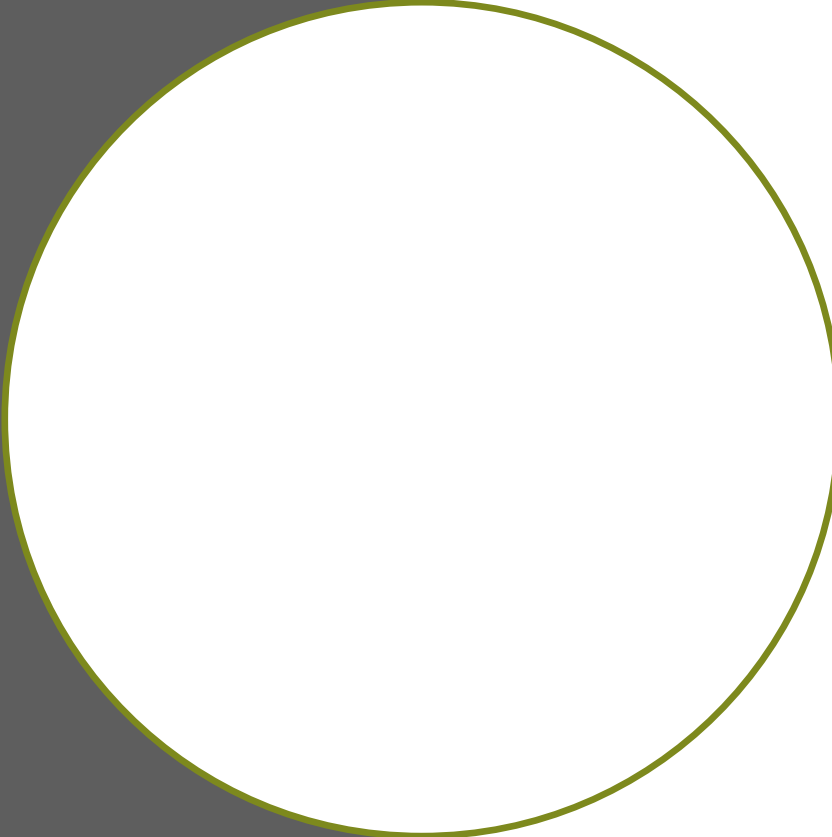
- **'Stream of consciousness novel'** like Woolf or Joyce, with repeating 'figures' or *leitmotifs*. The present 'triggers' **memories of the past** inside the psyche of the character.
- We may note that, as in many stream of consciousness novels, there are also **clusters of imagery** – here most strikingly, images of **light** – often functioning to convey **transcendence or transfiguration** and thus bringing together religious and aesthetic domains.
- The **novel of 'rememory'**, like Proust's *A La recherche du temps perdu*.
- Effect – **hypnotic, mesmeric intermingling of past and present**, yet they are also **irreparably separated**.

- Asle has basically **four relationships**:
- His love for his deceased wife, Ales, often anguished.
- His love-hate friendship with his neighbor, Asleik.
- The mysterious 'doppelganger' relationship he has with his namesake, Asle.
- He has a pleasant business relationship with the gallery owner, but we never do meet him.

- The beginning of the novel is almost like the cornfield scene in D H Lawrence's *The Rainbow* – very little is said, and what is said is a kind of (almost religious) incantation – **antiphon and response**. And, at the same time, the exchange has an almost **unbearable banality** which reminds us of Beckett.
- But there is a **beautiful rhythm** here – the figures move towards and away and towards each other. There is a kind of **mesmeric feel** to the scene, rendered all the more absorbing, perhaps, because this memory of love so absorbs the protagonist, Asle.
- At the beginning of the novel, Asle is driving, moving forward in time, yet recalling his youth and the scene in the playground, which we begin to realise is a **memory**, not part of the present.
- The strange connection between the two is also highlighted by the **similarity in their names** – Ales and Asle, as if they were echoes of one another.

- Early on, also, we have Asle's **ruminations about art**. He defies the market expectation 'people want their houses painted in brilliant sunshine'. He does this, but what he is really painting is the **light in the form of shadow** (p.75). We move between **aesthetic and religious domains**.
- Asle says that he painted the real light, which was the invisible light (p.75). Asleik, not schooled, is one of the few who see this.
- In one sense, this novel is a kind of **reverse bildungsroman** (a coming of age novel about an artist, like Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* or Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*), as the older Asle reflects how he began as a painter at the age of 12. Asle demands money, not for its own sake, but so that he can keep moving within the rhythm of painting – using the money to buy the raw materials for his art.
- And he confesses that the early pictures were pure lies, even though they looked very real (p.78).



- 
- **Light and insight** are often related, again operating on both aesthetic and religious planes.
  - Early in the novel, Asle tells us how he apprehends the flash of Aslek, from behind, standing in the doorway (p.81).
  - And these **flashes or glimpses** seem to be characteristic of Asle's habit of mind and way of seeing. These glimpses lodge within him and form as pictures. And because there is something disturbing, the artist must exorcise these glimpses by painting them (p.81).
  - This implies that **painting is a kind of expiation** or a way of **dealing with memory** perhaps?

- This way of apprehending reality as glimpse and flash, may be related to **Fosse's handling of time**; time stops inside Asle's head, a kind of **intense 'rest'** which allows him to appreciate the moment.
- Aslek says he did not stop in the doorway, yet, inside Asle's head, time has stopped.
- This is akin to what William James called **'duree'** – time inside one's own mind which can leap backwards as well as forwards, but for Asle, it is much more **dramatic** – these light-filled glimpses are **transfigurative** and he is able to slow down time to appreciate them.

# LIGHT AND DARK

- Asle's Catholicism is perhaps not so dissimilar to Fosse's – a **late convert**. Asle speaks about **biblical events** in the most natural way and there is a rather beautiful collision between his own story of himself and Ales and the Christian Christmas story (p.94). It is poignant too, since they had no children.
- The **imagery of light** which Asle labours for in his paintings, as well as in his life is, paradoxically achieved only through the most grievous darkness.



- St Andrew, martyred, at his own request on a saltire shaped cross, as he felt unworthy to be crucified in the same way as Jesus.

A photograph of St Andrew's Church in Borgund, Norway, a well-preserved medieval wooden stave church. The church features a complex, multi-tiered roof with decorative dragon-like carvings on the eaves. It is situated in a lush green valley with misty mountains in the background. In the foreground, a cemetery with numerous dark, rectangular gravestones is visible on a grassy slope. A semi-transparent white box with a black border is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the title text.

# ST ANDREW'S CHURCH, BORGUND, VESTLAND, NORWAY, BUILT 1180-1250

## ASLE AS CRUCIFIXIONAL FIGURE?

- Asle's painting of St Andrew invokes the **comparison between the painter and the martyred apostle**. Yet, Asle never presents himself in this light. Yet, there is no doubt he is full of anguish at the loss of his wife.
- Yet it may be that his doppelganger, Asle, is also **crucifixional** – the X shape suggests both symmetry and opposition.
- Asle returns to Bergen because his conscience causes him to feel guilty about not seeing the other Asle, also a painter, but with a serious drink problem.
- His pity is rewarded; he is vouchsafed another vision of himself and his wife, Ales, near the playground where he had first seen them.
- And there is, notably, a **simple symmetry between the lovers**, tracing a kind of X shape.

# DOUBLING

- **Asle embarks on his own crusade** and we get a portrait of the alcoholic Asle through the eyes of the reformed alcoholic Asle.
- We may note **there is no judgement, yet it is a desperately sad picture**. Asle eventually finds his double. He is in a bad state, but he brings him to The Boat Inn among the other lone drinkers. The sense of **overwhelming melancholia** is expressed in the most touchingly poetic metaphor about the sea being inside the men (p.147). The sailors are dying with the DTs (Delirium Tremens), and buried at sea because, perhaps it is a matter of sky as well as sea (p.150).
- The **metaphor** is all the more beautiful because retains the linguistic sparseness of the narrating register, but rises above it to an elemental quality reminiscent of but quite different from, Beckett.

- Asle manages to get his friend to a hospital to 'dry out' and then embarks on **another adventure** as he finds himself taking care of his double's dog, Bragi.
- The **bureaucracy** is beautifully rendered and set against the baleful passage where Asle having found his friend, gets lost himself.
- He meets Guro(Silje). She may or may not be a doppelganger for Asleik's sister.
- Against the **banalities** of the scene there is also a **dreamy, uncanny quality**, as if the whole thing is a **dreamstate**, or a phantasmagoric, nightmare state. Fosse draws upon the conventions of the **fantasy novel**, as well as **stream of consciousness** for tropes of repetition and lostness or fugal states, but matches this with great **verisimilitude** and **realistic precision** – perhaps creating an even more unsettling effect. Guro may be revenant in some sense (a part of the reformed Asle's past or apart of the unreformed Asle's past?), but she is also quite practical, making embroidery for a living, though also, possibly, earning a living as a sex worker. Or perhaps she is simply, like the two Asles, desperately lonesome.
- Yet, Guro can summon **transcendence** too as she recalls her former husband, the fiddler, as she suggests that he and everyone there and even the music somehow levitates, rising into the air. (p.197)





# ALES

- We begin to slowly discover what happened to Ales (p.218). The words '**despairing**' and '**desperate**' are plangently repeated.
- And we learn her fate, seeing her through Asle's eyes:
- Did she kill herself?

## A DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

- Towards the middle of the novel there is a **concentrated meditation on religion on faith, on the Great Existential questions of life and death.**
- Asle is raddled with uncertainty and a sense of paradox (p.232-233). An important distinction is made between **faith and knowledge**. There is an appeal to **grace** and to **mercy** (p.233).
- This section ends with a prayer as Asle undergoes his dark night of the soul. This is the end of section I.



## TOWARDS A DENOUEMENT

- **Section II**, much shorter, the plot gathers pace, momentum, paradoxically, as we enter the past of **childhood**, a troubling descent.
- Asle is back at his St Andrew's Cross painting. We move back in time to the painter's childhood. We have a sense of the **ominous** as he and his sister find themselves in a series of very precarious situations – the incipience of something monstrous or sinister recalls fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood.
- But there is a **twist**...
- Asle decides he may go with his friend to spend Christmas with Guro after all. **A change, a move outwards?**

# SOURCES OF IMAGES

Slide	Source
2	Left to right: <a href="https://www.stuttgarter-nachrichten.de/media/media.4aae5ab4-d44a-449a-8deb-4c5f66b70c36.original1024.jpg">https://www.stuttgarter-nachrichten.de/media/media.4aae5ab4-d44a-449a-8deb-4c5f66b70c36.original1024.jpg</a> & <a href="https://tovebreistein.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/People-7-420x600.jpg">https://tovebreistein.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/People-7-420x600.jpg</a>
6	<a href="https://www.worldometers.info/maps/norway-political-map/">https://www.worldometers.info/maps/norway-political-map/</a>
7	<a href="https://www.tide-forecast.com/tidelocationmaps/Bergen-Norway.10.gif">https://www.tide-forecast.com/tidelocationmaps/Bergen-Norway.10.gif</a>
8	<a href="https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3a/Haugesund.jpg">https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3a/Haugesund.jpg</a>
9	Left to right: <a href="https://www.touristphoto.no/images/kvam/nostmiljo.jpg">https://www.touristphoto.no/images/kvam/nostmiljo.jpg</a> & <a href="https://fossedagane.com/fosse2.jpg">https://fossedagane.com/fosse2.jpg</a>
10	<a href="https://media.timeout.com/images/105237855/image.jpg">https://media.timeout.com/images/105237855/image.jpg</a>
11	<a href="https://de.visitbergen.com/dbimgs/Hardangerfjord-Ulvik.jpg">https://de.visitbergen.com/dbimgs/Hardangerfjord-Ulvik.jpg</a>
12	<a href="https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/94/Lesja%2C_Norway_-_panoramio_(1).jpg/1280px-Lesja%2C_Norway_-_panoramio_(1).jpg">https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/94/Lesja%2C_Norway_-_panoramio_(1).jpg/1280px-Lesja%2C_Norway_-_panoramio_(1).jpg</a>
13	<a href="https://farm5.staticflickr.com/4038/35583816172_fa018f1e18_b.jpg">https://farm5.staticflickr.com/4038/35583816172_fa018f1e18_b.jpg</a>
15	<a href="https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Odda-Hardangerfjord.jpg">https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Odda-Hardangerfjord.jpg</a>
28	Left to right: <a href="https://ih1.redbubble.net/image.76716749.0745/ap,375x360,16x12,1,ffffff,t.u3.jpg">https://ih1.redbubble.net/image.76716749.0745/ap,375x360,16x12,1,ffffff,t.u3.jpg</a> & <a href="https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ed/Nuremberg_chronicles_f_106v_1.png">https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ed/Nuremberg_chronicles_f_106v_1.png</a>
29	<a href="https://i0.wp.com/archeyes.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Borgund-Stave-Church.jpg?resize=850%2C547&amp;ssl=1">https://i0.wp.com/archeyes.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Borgund-Stave-Church.jpg?resize=850%2C547&amp;ssl=1</a>