

Book Talk at the Nordic Heritage Museum

—Rebecca Snow

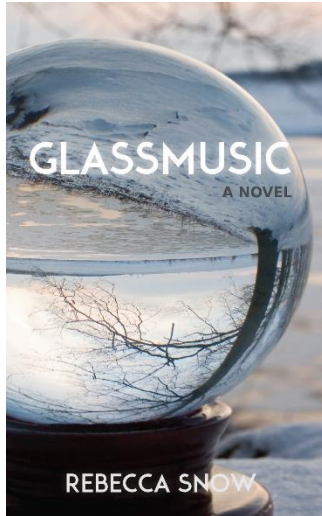


I was honored to give a book talk and reading of *Glassmusic* at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, for their Nordic Nights event on July 2nd. Many thanks to the museum, especially Stina Cowen, Public Programs Coordinator, who organized the event, gave me a wonderful introduction, and didn't fail to announce that my novel was shortlisted for the [2015 International Rubery Book Award](#)! The following gives a written (and extended) version of my presentation.

My mother, Målfrid Hoddevik, immigrated to Seattle from Norway in 1948 at the age of four. She grew up in Ballard, site of the Nordic Heritage Museum and a neighborhood rich in Norwegian-American history. My “Bestefar,” my mother's father, was a fisherman who frequented the Ballard Locks in a small commercial fishing boat owned by his brother, on their way to and from Alaska to fish cod.

My sister, Rachael Pearson, performed violin at the Nordic Heritage Museum as a child, and I visited there several times while growing up to learn more about my heritage, so it was especially meaningful to give a book talk there. Attendants were allowed free tours of the museum before the event, and I enjoyed showing my sixteen-year-old son the Norwegian room for the first time.



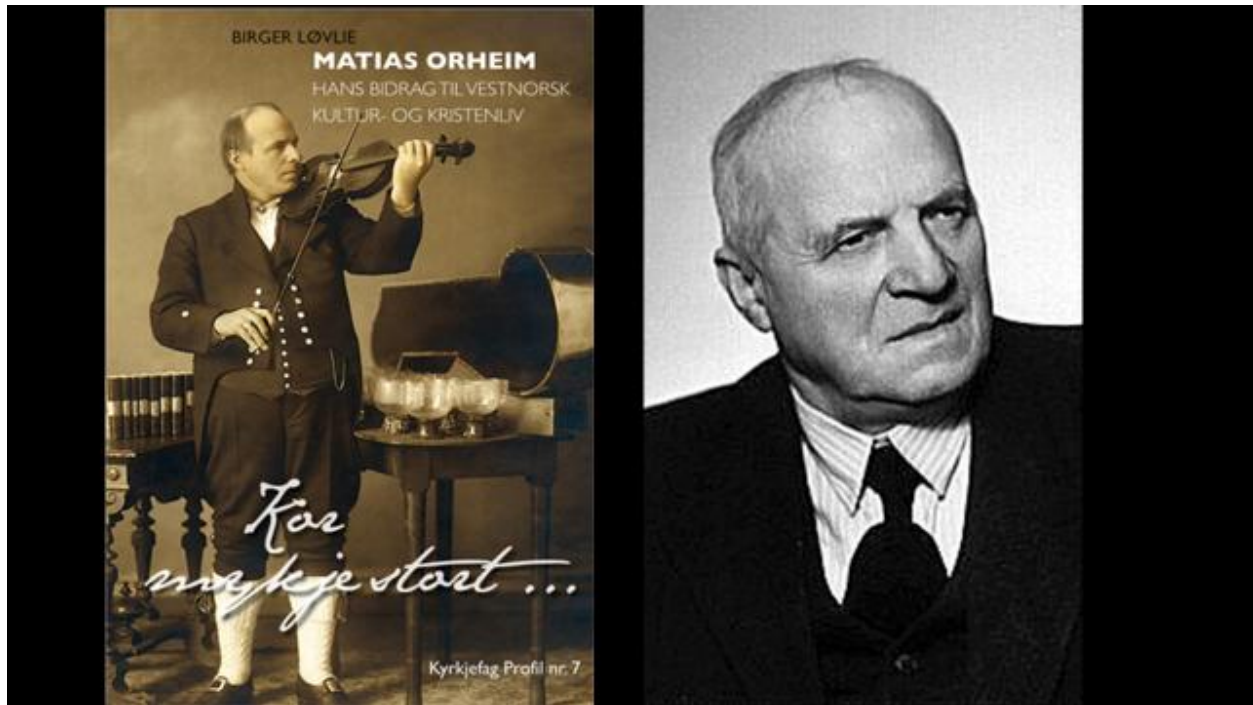


I started *Glassmusic* over two decades ago for my MFA thesis at the University of Montana. The summer before I graduated in 1993, I was in Norway for two incredible months. The landscape, my family history, and particularly my great-grandfather, Matias Orheim, first inspired my novel. Orheim was a blind musician, minister, composer, and writer. He received the king's medal of merit in gold for his life's work in 1953. I heard a lot of stories about him as a child, and when I was able to see the little museum for him in his home village, my fascination grew. I thought it would be interesting to write from the blind point of view, although, as I revised the manuscript years later, the musician's youngest daughter became the main character instead. Still, Oskar Solheim, based loosely on Matias Orheim, is a central character in the novel. Family tensions emerge with his focus on his ministry and the long weeks away from home.

Matias Orheim, 1884-1958



Birger Løvlie, Professor of Theology at Volda University College, wrote a series of books on historical figures in the Church of Norway (Lutheran). The book pictured below tells the story of Matias Orheim and his contributions to the church. I wish I could read *nynorsk* (academic Norwegian, and I can't even reach much regular Norwegian), but my mother translated for me (verbally) some interesting details about her grandfather, some of which I incorporated into my novel. Orheim's hymns are still sung in Norwegian churches, and my novel, as I mentioned, centers largely around the fictional character Solheim traveling across Norway and using his music to spread his joy in Christianity.



Here Orheim is standing in front of his family farm in Stårheim. The farmhouse is directly above him with the barn to the right. I modeled the family farm in the novel on this one, but I fictionalized the village to Fårheim, which means “sheep home” as well as “getting home.” When I returned to the novel manuscript after setting it aside for about 15 years, I knew I could

not do Stårheim justice based solely on memory, research, and photos. I was in a car accident not long after graduate school, and along with getting married and divorced and having a child, other things in life dominated my time and energy, including the long healing process from my injury. In fact, a day or two after my accident in May 1997, I attended my sister's violin performance at the Nordic Heritage Museum, and this is where I saw double for the first time. The Norwegian and American flags on either end of the stage split into two flags each, one a phantom of the original. I had sustained a mild traumatic brain injury (TBI) in the car accident, saw double for a year after that, and couldn't read like I loved to do for several years. It's interesting that I happened to be here at the museum during that crucial moment in my life (where I started seeing double), and here I was again, at a much better moment, vision clear, brain and spine very much healed, and presenting my first novel.

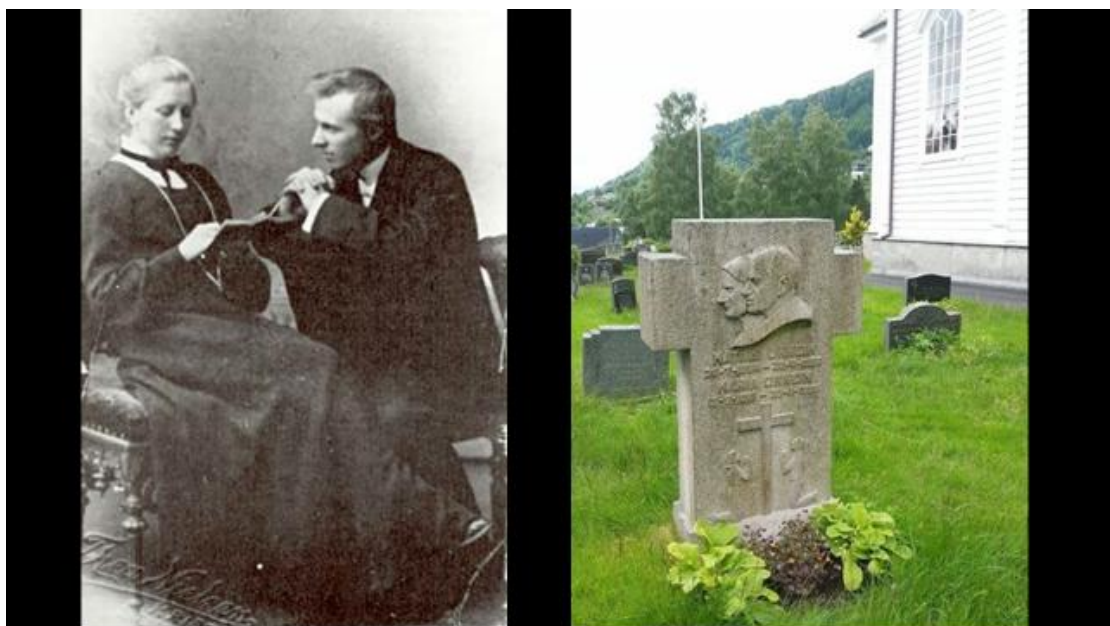
When I felt ready to return to the manuscript, I workshopped it for a few years at Lighthouse Writers Workshop in my current home city of Denver, Colorado. Classes there helped me realize the story was more about Ingrid, based loosely on my grandmother. It was hard giving up the blind point of view, which I had really enjoyed writing, but the story goes where it needs to go, and I found myself focused and inspired until the book's completion when Ingrid became the protagonist. The novel is now very much fictionalized, though some of the characters and events are still loosely based on family history. *Glassmusic* is a coming-of-age story, starting when Ingrid is five and ending when she is fifteen. In the book, Ingrid has perfect pitch (as did my "Bestemor" in real life), and she unwittingly takes over Mama's role in helping Papa tune and traveling with him across Norway. This causes tension in her parents' marriage, and Ingrid also becomes the victim of an elder sister's abuse. She witnesses a traumatic event when she is seven, and while she struggles with her faith, she must also navigate family secrets. She ventures to free herself from family dynamics, experiences first love, becomes injured—affecting her musicality, and begins an unresolved process of healing.



Above is a set of Orheim's glassmusic, and below are his shelves of Braille along with his violin cases. In the novel, Ingrid is often with Papa in the storehouse—where he has set up his office—helping him with his music. This is where Mama first becomes jealous of their time together.



If I had to choose one regret in writing my novel, it would be how I did not portray the great love story of Matias and Maria Orheim. Oskar and Lovisa Solheim have their own love story, but Lovisa is a weaker character than Maria, and her marriage wavers and struggles. I wanted to build more tension in the book and give Ingrid more family dynamic to confront. No marriage is perfect, but sometimes I wish I had stayed truer to this part of the family legend. In the novel, Papa is more like the original character of Orheim, I think, than Mama is like Maria. Following is a brief summation of the real love story.



When Matias and Maria were first engaged, they prayed they would not outlive each other. On April 20, 1958, they died on the same day about an hour apart, of different causes. They were both bedridden in different buildings, sending notes with family members back and forth between them, including favorite Bible verses. Maria was an extraordinarily strong woman, running the farm and helping Papa throughout his ministry. Lovisa, in the novel, is also strong—she runs the farm as well, but her connection with Oskar falters because of her jealousy. And I end the novel, of course, long before they reach old age. Here is a photo of Maria and Matias when they are older. If I understand correctly, Maria is reading to him as he types in Braille.



In 2010, the Sogn og Fjordane Teater company produced a play about Matias and Maria Orheim. It received rave reviews, packed full houses in theaters across Norway, and was produced again in 2012. I was unable to attend, but below are a couple of photos from the production:





Orheim was a man whose faith and passion changed the Norwegian church and influenced his family down the generations. Other less inspiring events, however, also affected our family. My Bestemor Ingrid suffered a great deal from the darker side of religion.



Here is my Bestemor about the age her fictional character is at the beginning of the novel:



And here she is about the age the fictional Ingrid is at the end of the novel:



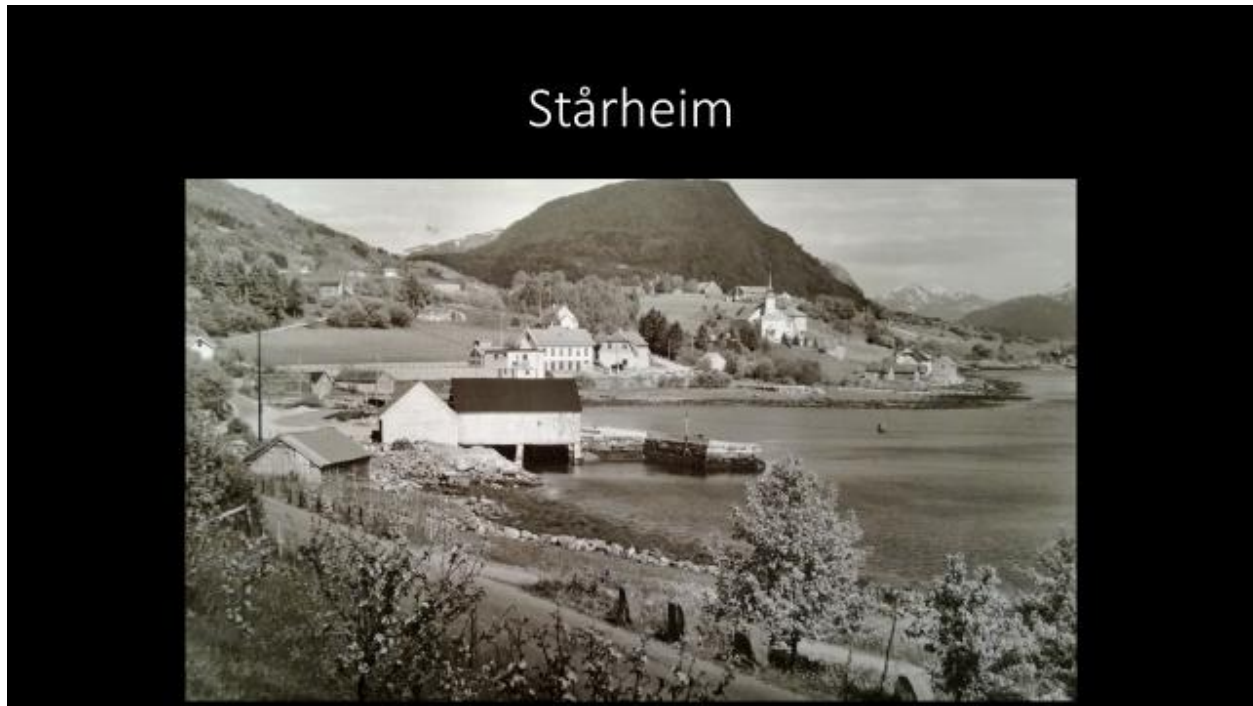
Ingrid had a lot of siblings (seven, if I remember correctly). I couldn't quite squeeze them all into my short novel, so I had to kill a few of them off. ☺ The fictional Ingrid has two sisters and two brothers. I kept some of the first names the same and changed others.



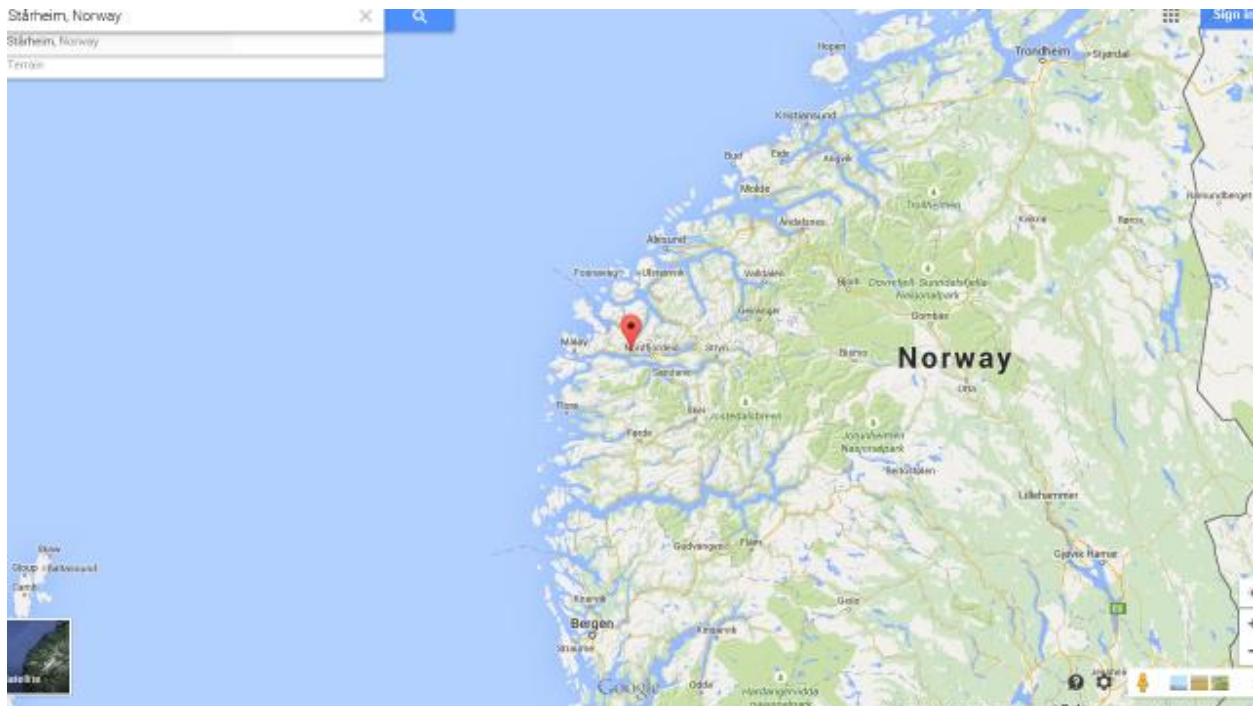
Here is a photo including my Bestemor when she is grown. Ingrid is on the left, holding my mother Målfrid in her lap. Ingrid's sister Alvdis is in the middle, and a sister-in-law is on the right. The other children are my mother's cousins, and Matias, of course, is playing his violin.



Here is a photo of the village where my Bestemor grew up on the Orheim farm:



Stårheim is located in Nordfjord, in western Norway:



A present-day photo of Stårheim:



The church in Stårheim, still the same building as when Orheim was there:





Here is an old photo of the family farm:



And here is the house (remodeled) from the other side:



The storehouse, where Papa had his office, is featured prominently in my novel:



Orheim's desk:



Orheim's office:



The barn, remodeled into a bed-and-breakfast:



Visitors can now stay at the farm and visit the Orheim museum.



Here is a family painting (the artist is a distant relative with the last name of Orheim) of Dombestein, fictionalized to Ulvestein, a small village across the fjord from Fårheim. In the novel, this is where the abusive minister, Arne Olsrud, lives.



Another regret in finishing my novel is that Ingrid doesn't make it to Hoddevik, where my mother was born. To me, this is the most beautiful place on earth:



I hope, one day soon, to write another literary novel set in Norway, this time in a fictionalized village based on Hoddevik (below is another view).



Meanwhile, I will be traveling to Norway this August, visiting Oslo, Stårheim, and Hoddevik, and working on a very different novel. My brother and I are coauthoring a fantasy, where our Norwegian heritage still applies—this time in the form of trolls! So far, it is set in the Pacific Northwest where we grew up. We are debating whether the protagonist travels to Norway.