



THIN ICE BY MIKAEL ENGSTRÖM

About the book

Mik is a child-at-risk who lives in an inner city flat in Stockholm with his drunken father and older brother. When his father is sent to a treatment centre, Social Services arrange for Mik to go and live with his aunt, Lena, in northern Sweden. This works out well for Mik but later, against his will, he is taken home and then is placed with foster parents who treat him cruelly. He escapes back to Lena but again Social Services track him down and in a dramatic dénouement he gets his heart's desire.

About the author

Mikael Engström was born in 1961 and grew up in a suburb of Stockholm, Sweden. In the mid-1980s he studied photography for two years and started writing seriously. Nowadays he earns his living as a freelance journalist and photographer.

About the translator

Susan Beard has been translating for over twenty years and specialising in literature for the last five. She has an MA in Literary Translation from the University of East Anglia and lives in Brighton, Sussex in the UK.

BEFORE YOU READ...

Look at the cover of the novel.

Comment on the font used for the title.

If someone is said to be 'walking on thin ice' what does this mean?

What questions comes to mind when you look at the departing figure on the cover?

Does the cover remind you of anything?



EXPLORATIONS

Part 1: The Snake

1. Describe Mik's experience of school.
2. Why did Mik and his friends attack the winos' camp and what were the consequences?
3. Describe Mik's home life.
4. Do you think Tony was abusive to his brother, Mik?
5. Was Lisa Nordahl skilled as a psychologist? Why do you think this?
6. Why did Mik remain in the swimmers' line?
7. 'Alone was a snake with skin that stung' was how Mik described his deep fear and anxiety. What did he mean?
8. How can you explain Mik's fascination with whales?
9. Why did Mik rush off the bus on the way back from the museum?
10. What is your impression of Mik's school?

Part 2: Land of Ice

1. Where did Mik go while his father was in the treatment Centre?
2. With reference to the text, list all the people who saw Mik waiting in the square for his aunt.
3. What was Mik's first impression of the people of the village?
4. Would you say that Mik was an observant person? Why?
5. What did Mik's school mates make of him on his first day at school?
6. In what ways did Bengt and Bertil help Mik to settle in?
7. Were the children here better off or worse off than Mik's friends in Solna?
8. In what illegal activities were Pi and her friends engaged?
9. What do you think about the relationship between Mik and Lena?
10. Pi said to Mik, 'You can actually be scared and brave at the same time'. What did she mean?



Part 3: The Zombie Book

1. Parts 1 and 2 are written in the third person. What do you notice about the narrator in Part 3? Why did the author do this?
2. Why is this section called The Zombie Book?
3. Was life the same for Mik now as it had been before he went to Lena's house in the North?
4. Why does Mik want to stay at home even though life is so tough for him?
5. Why doesn't Mik confide in Lisa Nordahl?
6. How do the Social Services finally catch up with Mik?

Part 4: The Tormentors

1. Describe Mik's living accommodation at his foster home.
2. Describe a typical day.
3. Why, do you think, did Louise behave as she did towards Mik?
4. What do you think was the worst aspect of life for Mik at the kennels?
5. How did Mik make his way back to Lena's house?

Part 5: The Raft

1. When Mik returned to Lena's house, had his friends forgiven him for exposing their cat business. What did they think of him now?
2. What do you think of Social Services handling of Mik's case?
3. How did the journey on the raft change Mik?
4. In what ways did Mik's opinion of his brother change when Tony came to visit?
5. How did the story end? Did you find the ending satisfactory?



QUICK REVIEW

1. Give a summary of the novel in no more than ten sentences.
2. Complete the following statements:
 - When I was reading *Thin Ice* I was reminded of...
 - The one thing I really like about the novel is...
 - A question I would like the answer to is...
 - I wonder why...
 - I'm not sure about...
 - What I learned from reading *Thin Ice* is...

Character of Mik

1. At the end of the novel, how do you think Mik would answer these questions (if confidentiality was guaranteed)?
 - a) Who am I?
 - b) Who can I trust?
 - c) Where do I belong?
 - d) Who loves me?
 - e) Where can I feel safe?
 - f) Who can I turn to when I am in trouble?
 - g) How brave am I?
 - h) What will I do with my life?
2. Select what you consider to be the most important moment in the novel for Mik.
 - a) Give a title to the moment and describe what happens in three or four sentences
 - b) Use two or three adjectives to describe what we learn about Mik from the moment
 - c) In three or four words describe the world Mik inhabits as revealed in this moment



- d) Describe the support (or lack of it) that Mik receives from those around him at this moment
- e) Describe your reaction as a reader to the moment
- f) Choose the most important line or short quotation from the moment
- g) Suggest music that you would use as the soundtrack for the moment you have chosen.

Themes of the Novel

1. Which two of the following are the closest to your understanding of the main themes of the novel?
 - Family
 - Growing Up
 - Survival
 - Identity
 - Friendship
 - Belonging
 - Love
 - LoyaltyExplain your choices.
2. Based on your understanding of the themes of the novel, suggest a new title.
3. Write a blurb for the novel which alerts readers to the main themes in *Thin Ice*.

Novel into Film

1. Write a one page 'pitch' to a film producer, explaining why the story would make a great movie (Don't forget that the author is a photographer)
2. Write a tagline which could be used to promote the film.



3. Casting Director: What actors would you cast for the roles of Mik, Pi and Lena in a film version of the novel?

Imaginative Interventions

Front Page News

Create a tabloid front page which reports on the stand-off on Lake Selet. Compose a suitable headline and subheading. Write the opening paragraph of the report. Be sure to capture the style and tone of tabloid news reporting.

The Mik Tribunal

Imagine there was an investigation into the manner in which Mik's case was handled by the Social Services. Make a list of the main findings of the Tribunal and list some recommendations which might prevent another child suffering the same fate.

Letters to Tony

Make a collection of the four letters Mik sent to Tony. Compose another one, written when Mik recovered from his ordeal on Lake Selet.