Critical acclaim for KIM, MY BELOVED in Denmark:

"Many people should read it to become wiser about love, dissimulation and anxiety — and many more because it’s a very important work of art in Danish erotic literature."
— Henning Ipsen in Jyllands-Posten.

"A gripping, brave and painful indictment of a social puritanism that forces so many people to experience the most wonderful thing in their lives as simultaneously the most terrible thing of all."
— Søren Vinterberg in Information.

"A human document that is both harrowing and encouraging."
— Bent Mohn in Politiken.

"It’s an incredibly intense love he describes in this autobiographical novel."
— Mia Bagger in Frederiksborg Amts Avis.
KIM, MY BELOVED

by Jens Eisenhardt

Translated by Stephen W. Foster
All of a sudden there was this boy in my life...
I was twenty-eight. He was fourteen. And, to make matters worse, I was his teacher and he was my pupil.
It ought to have ended in catastrophe.
Instead it ended in love.
And that is what this first book of Kim and me is all about.
KIM, I LOVE YOU.

Today as much as ever.

"Watch out! Oh, sorry... you first."

I am writing my way back to our first meeting twenty years ago. On the path, suddenly, there you are.

Idiot, I tell myself: you’re always in such a rush — and, typically, you talk too much.

We’re in the school garden, paths freshly raked in honour of the occasion.

No matter. The collision was unavoidable. I have just rounded the corner of the dormitory. You were walking in the other direction, coming from the road.

And there we stand, the two of us clinging to one another.

A fine way to meet!

You mumble some sort of apology. I laugh nervously and put on my best don’t-worry-about-it smile.

"Now then," I say, "it was really my fault."

And step back to get a better look at my new pupil. With one arm you’re clutching a quilt; under the other is a cardboard box bound with twine.

One could just as well say it’s a box and quilt with a boy attached.

You come up to the middle of my nose, or thereabouts.

"Well, hello." — I present myself. — "What’s your name?"

You blink, still a bit disoriented after our collision. You take a couple of swallows, shake your head impatiently.

I see you’re wondering whether you should try to shake
hands with me, but that’s impossible because of the box and the quilt.

"My name is Kim," you answer with a light voice already hoarsely breaking out of childhood.

We size each other up.

To me, you are one among thirty-five new pupils, all starting that November day our first five-month winter term. To you, I am just another teacher in a new school where you’ll stay a while until it is time to move on.

"Kim," I repeat, searching the list of boarding students I have in my hand. "Kim, Kim, Kim," I drone. "Well, what do you know? Here you are. Kim Steffensen — that must be you, right?"

How asinine can one get?

But you nod, helpfully. Your eyes wander over to the yard in front of the school buildings: cars are arriving there with other students and their parents.

"And from Valby, no less," I go on chattering. "It’s very nice to meet a true Copenhagenite way out here in the country. I come from the city myself."

And that’s why you talk so much, I think, furious with myself but anxious to get it over with — out with the beggar from his miserable lair; back inside before he begins to complain!

"Did your parents bring you?" I ask.

You shake your head, looking away again. "The principal drove me up here."

Aha, you’re one of our dear welfare kids, little Kim Steffensen! At once I indulge you with spontaneous feelings of sympathy. City boy, child welfare boy: you won’t give me any trouble up there in one of those old cramped four-boy rooms. You are used to walking, and taking care of yourself. In your mind, we are just another institution.

"Is that your suitcase over there by the hedge?" I ask. You nod.
"Well, Kim" I say, walking to the hedge and picking it up. "I'll take it, and now I'll show you where you'll be living."

I march you in front of me. "Yes, that's right, around the corner, in through the door — now to the left and up the stairs — watch your head! — well, you don't need to worry about that. And here" — pushing the door with my foot — "here you will sleep with three other boys. It looks like you're the first, so you have choice of beds."

You toss the quilt onto one of the top bunks.
"Well," I say (oh, I'm being so clever), "you choose an upper, eh?"

You don't answer.
"Okay," I say, "I'm sure you'll manage. The others will show up soon enough. This is your closet. You brought some hangers, didn't you? And there on the door you can read the regulations all of us must abide by if we are to endure living under the same roof."

I give you a well-worn pedagogue's smile. And get none in return. You are standing, in fact, with your back to me, fingers fiddling with the twine on the cardboard box which you have placed on the table by the window.

"All right," I say, with the hint of a sigh, shifting to another foot in the doorway, "I really must go — right now — to see about the others. Afternoon coffee's in about an hour."

Suddenly you turn around, and for two seconds we look each other straight in the eye. Or, I should say; at an angle: you looking up, I looking down. Your eyes are blue. No, they are not: they are more grey than blue. But wait a minute — is that a somewhat roguish gleam in those blue-grey eyes?

"Are you really a teacher?" you ask. For just a moment I suspect you were trying out a bit of cheekiness on me, but obviously that's not the case. You appear quite relaxed
and natural; there would seem to be only the slightest trace of mischief in your smile.

"Of course," I respond quickly, a little hot in the face. "What else could I be?"

"Well, sir, I thought that perhaps you..."

But I’m not the least interested in what a whelp like you might think. Who do you imagine you are? Don’t I look like a real teacher? Is my natural dignity slightly askew? How dare you suggest I’m not a full-fledged pedagogue?

So I interrupt: "Don’t say ‘sir’. We use our real names here."

"For the teachers too?"

"Yes. Their last names."

"And the same for the principal?"

I nod.

"I’m not used to that." You give your head the same impatient shake I’d noticed down on the garden path.

"Well, isn’t it nice you have the chance to try something new?" I say drily, being perhaps a bit brusque.

"Yes," you answer, "it is nice."

That sounds sincere. Perhaps you aren’t the little brat I’d first taken you for. Again I shift my feet and prepare to go.

"Thanks for the help," you say.

"What do you mean?" I am immediately on my guard.

"With the suitcase."

"Well, that..." I begin.

And suddenly I see you. I mean I see you in a wholly new way. You become a reality for me. How can I explain it? — how, until now, just another new pupil, a name and a number on my list of boarding students, the Kim Steffensen from Valby, and Copenhagen spawn, changes in an eternity no longer than the blink of an eye into a human being which some force, or power, in myself begins to move into my life, into my own flesh, a living and yet new, an almost unused little creature, who fills me, be-
comes a flame, a fire in my blood, and etches on my inner retina that portrait of yourself which ever since has never quite been able to be erased.

You become the other for me.

The only.

The Kim.

I cross over, in my vision. Even though it is brief, you must feel my gaze penetrating you. In any case, you turn abruptly and look out the window, down to the school playground now teeming with people.

And I?

André Gide said somewhere that there is nothing more difficult than observing beings in growth. One should view them, actually, only from the side, in profile...

I see you in profile.

You stand at the window, with behind you the road and the dike, the ploughed sloping fields, and far out on the horizon the fjord with its choppy waters and foam under a shimmering, sun-filled November sky. It is clear today, unusually fine weather for the season. The wind about the old villa on the hill whistles through the leaky window frames, combs through the Virginia creepers on the grey brick wall and tosses about the flag which flies over our heads.

I see you in profile.

Your low forehead, your dark, fine hair plastered down with Brylcreem or Brilliantine and combed back in a hopeless, unbecoming attempt to follow the duck-tail fashion of the day. Your nicely shaped ear. Your light, slightly projecting cheek which reminds me of the Slavic boys I have met in East Europe. Your large yet soft nose. The rising of your neck over the shirt collar's chequered pattern, your light blue sweater. The corner of your mouth pulls downward. Are you biting your lip over my importune attention? Do you feel flattered, shy? Or are you simply
indifferent? Do you think, "Why in hell doesn't the man just clear out?" Since then I have never been able to guess what you were feeling then in your heart, neither on that day nor since.

But I see your eye — the fallow-deer eye — under your obliquely outlined black eyebrow. I remember and see, even now. The colour is blue-grey, the shape is of an almond, the expression is wondering, vulnerable, on guard...

A boy's profile. Graceful and yet so shy...
I tear myself away and tumble down the stairs.
In headlong flight.

EASTER SATURDAY, five and a half months later. I am up at a most ungodly hour.

Sweet Jesus, am I ever in the proper mood to celebrate the resurrection!
The weather is beautiful, the school mercifully quiet. Showering in the little bathroom behind the kitchen, I can't help breaking this tranquillity by bawling lustily, "I love you, I love you, I L-O-V-E you!"

It sounds awful, but there's no one about to shut me up.
I eat breakfast, spruce up in my room and drive down to the co-op store.
I have an account here, thank God. The last half of every month I must pinch my pennies. But the co-op profits from the school. We are fine friends, the co-op and I. I say good morning to the taciturn but clever girl in the blue smock behind the main counter.

"Do you have a dry white wine?" I inquire. I have guests. I have to give a party.

Careful. They might think I just sit up there in my room and get drunk. Well, it's true, but what people don't know, etc. Not that there are any puritans in our little parish. People here know how to have a good time. No fundamen-
talist shadow falls across this gentle Funen countryside. Local Christianity is of the joyful variety which holds that divine charity is the one great commandment.

"How about this?" asks the girl in the blue smock, holding a bottle under her nose.

"Is it dry?"

"Yes, it might even be a bit on the sour side," she replies in her characteristic sing-song.

"Then I’ll take it, two bottles. And two of my usual con... hold on, I’d better also have some of your best sherry — and, while we’re at it, a bottle of the cheapest, too... Yes, the one with the yellow label. It’s awfully sweet, but I think that my guests...

I am out of my mind. What possesses me? But, good lord, it is Easter. It is holiday, it is resurrection. Larks sing over the fields. The air trembles with luminescence. Standing in that dark co-op at the bend in the road across from the white village church, I want to burst out into the light, the open air, the springtime.

"Do you have Russian crabs? Do you have caviare? Do you have...?"

I am intoxicated.

It’s a love feast I am preparing.

Then I come down to earth and acknowledge that you are a fourteen-year-old boy, so I buy cakes and chocolates and oranges and sodas and, for safety’s sake, beer for myself.

"How about some grapes?" asks the officious co-op manager who can always be counted on to turn up wherever he smells a potential sale.

"They don’t look very good," I say.

"I’ll let you have them cheap."

"Okay, but only the best bunches. Now I also better have a litre of ice-cream — no, two — we’ll make it nougat, and some waffles and..."
Yes, what else, I ask myself, does a fourteen-year-old eat?

*Everything*, I suppose!

"Sausages," I say. "Give me two, no, three cans of red sausages..."

At last I tear myself away from the co-op’s temptations and its manager’s salesmanship. My old bike is so heavily laden I have to walk it the two or three hundred uphill metres back to school. I greet our carpentry shop teacher’s wife and the Social Democrat parish council member who has recently become active in school affairs —

A victory for us.

"Good morning," I say.

"Good morning," they say.

Everyone is ebullient because of the instant spring weather. Some children come whistling down the hill towards the village.

"Good morning, good morning."

(That was before we started to say "hi".)

I take the ice-cream to the freezer, put the sodas and beer in the refrigerator. The girls are on holiday. The kitchen is empty and clean. I have the whole school to myself. But it is still early. It will be hours before my guest arrives and the feast can begin. I decide to take a bicycle ride.

There are two ways I can go: out along the fjord toward the gym teacher’s farm where you are visiting over the holidays and helping with the chores, or around by the cove. The first I took the other day when I invited you to visit me this afternoon. So I now choose the second. With a couple of cool bottles of beer in my carrying case, I set out towards Kerteminde, but turn off just before the town and proceed to the right around the cove. With several rest stops it takes me a couple of hours. And I have my own special place where there is a broad view of the undulating
hills pinned here and there by tall poplars, the trees of my childhood, of our old home at the lake. Here I stop, sit on a stone garden wall and pull out a beer. It is only April but the sun warms my nose. I close my eyes and drink. Then I open them and absorb the landscape and its trees. By now I know this view in all its seasons. Long ago I made it mine, but today it is more beautiful than ever. The trees seem to draw near, become my confidants. I whisper to the naked, aspiring poplars, “It’s quite true, I assure you — I love him. It’s impossible, but I love him. What shall I do?”

And, blinking my eyes, I feel something wet. It could be the wind: an April day is unpredictable. Back on the bike, pumping hard, the wet dries. And as I make my way home a wild joy springs up in me, transforming mere courage into recklessness. I am young. I am strong. I can cope with anything. I challenge the world. I shout to the skies and the earth, to the sun. “Hey,” I cry, “look at me! Watch me fly over the fields and home! I’m in a hurry, my friends. And do you know why? Today, today my beloved is coming... is coming... is coming... today!”

YOU DON’T COME.

Goddamnit, you don’t come!

But what have I been doing? Preparing a feast for a fourteen-year-old boy! To make him a declaration of love! I must be crazy.

I am crazy.

I wait the whole afternoon. At first in high spirits and trembling with vitality, then troubled, at last apathetic. After all, why should you bother to come? You are free from school, now, out of the cage and the dust and all that interminable talk, talk, talk. Well, I wasn’t planning to act like a teacher. How could you imagine I was? Haven’t I said we must discuss future plans? Future plans?
What an ugly phrase!
I should have known you’d much rather drive a tractor.
No, you are a turd. A dumb little boy I’m just wasting
my time on. A mess. A Valby punk.
Ah, Kim, why don’t you come?
I eat the crabs and drink the first bottle of white wine.
Now I fetch the other: you won’t get any of that! You’ll
have to settle for a pink soda. If you come, that is. Yes, if
you come...
But you don’t come.
When it grows dark outside I realise you really have let
me down. It’s intolerable. For two days I’ve lived in an
ecstasy of anticipation: two days filled with bright dreams
about my first meeting alone with you, after all the winter’s
trials and troubles. No, no, I’m not up to anything,
absolutely not! I just want to chat with you, get to know
you better, find out a little more about you. That’s all I
have in mind. That’s all I want.
To get to know you better...
Man, how you lie, I tell myself in white wine intoxica-
tion, it finally sinking in that all my joy has been in vain.
I’ve waited in vain. Dreamed in vain.
You’re still lying, Jens!
For I know in my heart that I want more than just to
talk with you about — future plans! I don’t give a damn
about plans in the future. It’s now I want to be with you.
It’s now I want to be near you. How near? Very near. It’s
now I....
Watch out!
My first words to you, spoken on that first day on the
path, sound a warning in my ears. “Yes,” I say aloud,
rising from my chair, “you really must get yourself
together. Don’t ruin everything. Besides,” — I laugh an
ugly and bitter laugh — “besides, he hasn’t even darkened
your door, and probably won’t before it’s time to go back
to Valby for the summer holidays. And then you won’t see him for months, perhaps ever again. Isn’t it better that way? You’ll have time to forget him. So, for chrissake, pull yourself together. You’ve got more important things to do than moon over some snot-nosed kid!”

I put a record on — Chopin’s nocturnes. Of course they don’t help, they just make things worse. So I try Bach’s preludes. Peace descends. I become cool and remote. Preludes to what?

And I finish the white wine.

But in the night I awake and make love to you in the dark. I kiss your hair, your eyes, your too-low forehead. I let my tongue play with your nose, my lips glide along your cheeks. I cleave to your soft skin.

I drink the sweetness of your fallow-deer’s eyes, and I come, groaning aloud, and weep for a moment in despair.

The little death.

And afterwards the loneliness of hell. The troubled dreams. The shadows. A hangover. Slime on the tongue. Sand in the eyes.

Then Easter Sunday is breaking. Resurrection.

I have beer for breakfast, hating the world.

YOU COME IN THE AFTERNOON.

“Good day,” you say, and sit down uninvited on the sofa.

“Good day.” I stare, gape at you. Here you are, so healthy and fresh after your ride in on your bike. Irritatingly fresh. Irritatingly unconcerned.

You look at me calmly.

“Whew, I had a head wind,” you say.

“I thought we’d agreed it was yesterday,” I begin. My voice is tight.

Then I get hold of myself.

“But it doesn’t matter. You are welcome, Kim.”
And so I begin. And so it starts. Thank heavens you are quite unaware of the agonies you have caused me. I swear you’ll never find out about them. Now I must pull myself together, play my part. There you sit on the sofa, sweet and kind and trusting. I can’t guess what you’re thinking, but that, too, doesn’t matter. I have to assume you have come because you wanted to come.

“You could drink a glass of sherry, couldn’t you?”

“Yes, please.”

“You’ll get the cheapest,” I grin. “Not because of the cost but because it’s the sweetest. For myself, I prefer it half-dry.”

What does all this matter to you? But I have to say something. Your sudden appearance has thrown me. I’d just resigned myself to endless hours of nursing a hangover in masochistic lust, my heart upside down, on this wretched Easter Sunday, and now this little person comes into my home demanding all my attention, not to speak of my ingenuity. What, precisely, are we going to talk about? We find that out soon enough: first priority is to get something crammed into your stomach so you’ll really feel welcome in my home.

“Have you eaten?” I ask. “So you have. Well, I still can give you some cakes and...”

I dish them up: cakes, oranges, grapes, chocolate, cigarettes. I feel ridiculous, but you seem to appreciate my efforts. In any case, you tuck into everything with enthusiasm.

“I have some ice-cream, too,” I say. “Nougat. It’s down in the kitchen freezer.”

“We might save it till later,” you suggest magnanimously, and set your teeth into a piece of co-op icky-sweet sugar-coated jam roll. That disappears in two mouthfuls. You lick your fingers, take another piece and smile
at me. God be praised for giving me that smile — the jam roll you can keep.

"To your health," I say.

"To yours," you say, suddenly grown up, and lift your glass. We give each other the traditional nod, raise our glasses to our lips and drink. And you start to cough, the wine and jam roll going down the wrong way. I get up and slap you on the back.

"Excuse... me...!" — you sputter the words along with the wine and crumbs, red in the face. You hiccup. Your eyes water. Then we start to laugh.

That helps. After a while I assume my teacher's rôle, and in my usual teacher's voice — how I hate it! — I say, "It's my impression, in fact the impression of all of us, that you like it here in the school. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," you say, your eyes growing serious.

"Now, I know you got yourself into some kind of trouble back in Copenhagen. But maybe it can be turned to your advantage, being a ward of child-care. We figure for the present those people will let you to carry on here with our ten-month course beginning in September. We will have to wait for the final decision, but if they give their permission, would you go along with it?"

"Yes," you answer, "I'd like that."

"In the long term we must see if you can't be eased back into the normal school system. But it all depends on whether you have the abilities and the desire. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yes," you answer, "I realise that."

"And it would be stupid," I go on lecturing, "if you didn't take advantage of this opportunity now while they're willing to pay for your education. For you must realise, Kim, that without formal schooling no one gets anywhere...."
God help me, how I'm talking! But what am I talking about? There is really only one thing on my mind: Kim Steffensen must come back to our school in September....

For me, that will be enough.

"Maybe you don't like being under child-care all that much," I suggest.

You shrug your shoulders. "I haven't really thought about it."

Immediately you are on the defensive.

There is no conviction in what you've just said.

"Obviously, that can be rather unpleasant," I add. "But it does give you certain economic advantages. While you're here at school the child-care people don't stick their noses into your life, do they?"

"No," you say, "that's true."

I don't press any further. I have uttered words, you have affirmed them. Is this the sort of intimacy I am after? Certainly not. I decide to let all future plans hang in abeyance and try to get you to talk about yourself. But how does one induce a fourteen-year-old to open up to a man almost old enough to be his father — especially when that grown-up is his teacher?

I ask if you like music.

"It can be very nice," you answer, and look as people look when they're asked such a stupid question.

"Okay, what sort do you like?"

Once again you shrug your shoulders.

"Different kinds."

"Well, you can't sing," I say with a touch of good-natured irony. "That we learned at the Christmas programme. But, what's more important, you have a natural sense of rhythm."

I put a 45 RPM record on the player. Tommy Steele's Cool Water, the only thing of that kind I own. It was an ironic going-away present from a Copenhagen friend when
she learned I’d be working with young people. I don’t like it, but it does have ‘drive’. It is coarse, obtrusive, impudent. Your face, however, betrays nothing of what you think of rock-and-roll. You sit on the sofa and pretend at least to listen. You are a polite guest. Afterwards I play a Josephine Baker disk, and then some Polish and Hungarian folk music and a Russian pop song I’d bought in Moscow. By now I have exhausted my entire repertory of popular music.

Now what in the world should we do?

"By the way, my brother is crazy about opera," you suddenly, and gratuitously, announce.

"He is? How interesting," I say.

"Yeah," you add with a giggle, "and my big sister — the oldest but one, I mean — is in love with the ancient Egyptians."

I look at you closely from my station by the record player. You are still a very little boy. Aren’t you just showing off for me? I am ashamed of myself. It is my fault that you feel you have to trot out an opera-loving brother and a big sister having an affair with Tutankhamun. Why did I have to fill your head with all this culture nonsense?

You raise your eyes and look at me. Do you still have a surprise up your sleeve?

"You’re a communist, aren’t you?"

"I consider myself one, yes," I say, but decide not to try to explain the difference between the old orthodox and newly established party.

"My father was a communist, too," you say proudly. "But I never knew him. That’s because he died before I was born."

A COUPLE OF HOURS later I have finished off most of the co-op’s expensive, semi-dry sherry, while you have sipped only one or two glasses of the sweet and have now
switched to soda. You have eaten all the cakes and we have shared the ice-cream. There is only the fruit and chocolate left. I have forgotten about the sausages.

“Eat up!” I say giddily, and you put away another couple of sticks of chocolate, the last of the grapes and three-fourths of an orange. I cannot eat a bite more, but on the other hand I am getting gloriously drunk. I don’t believe you realise that yet. I am quite good at disguising a drunk.

It has been dark for a long time outside. I switch on the stand lamp by the sofa and set a couple of lighted candles on the table. I pull down the blinds over the window which gives onto the principal’s house. Security measures, I reason. But what do I mean, ‘security’? What is going on in my befuddled brain? Well, I cannot be bothered with that question. I sit down heavily in front of you in the armchair. You are sprawled on the sofa leafing through some large picture books I bought on my trips to Eastern Europe. The glow of the candles and the lamp falls on your hair and your cheeks as you idly turn the pages. Yes, we have talked about travel. That is to say, I have talked about travel — and the arts and politics and God knows what else. I even, at last, tried to explain to you the difference between orthodox party communists and members of the new Left Wing Socialist Party. My tongue has loosened. I talk so easily to you. And I need to talk. You are a good listener. You have a sense of humour. You can laugh at things.

It’s a relief.

I put another record on the player. I no longer worry about your tastes but select the music I like. And it seems that’s exactly what you want, too. You feel at home. You feel confident. There’s no one telling you what to do and what not to do. You can be yourself.