

Sissel Horndal

Máttaráhkká's Journey

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A Story from the Land
of the Sami



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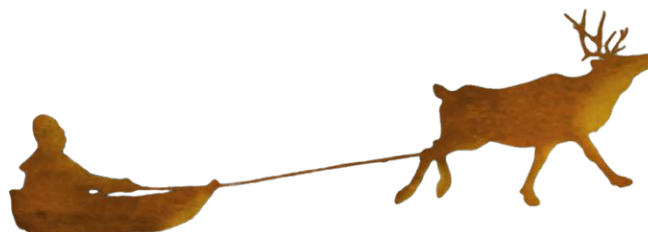
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BAOBAB BOOKS

A Story from the Land
of the Sami

Translated into English
by Barbara Brennwald



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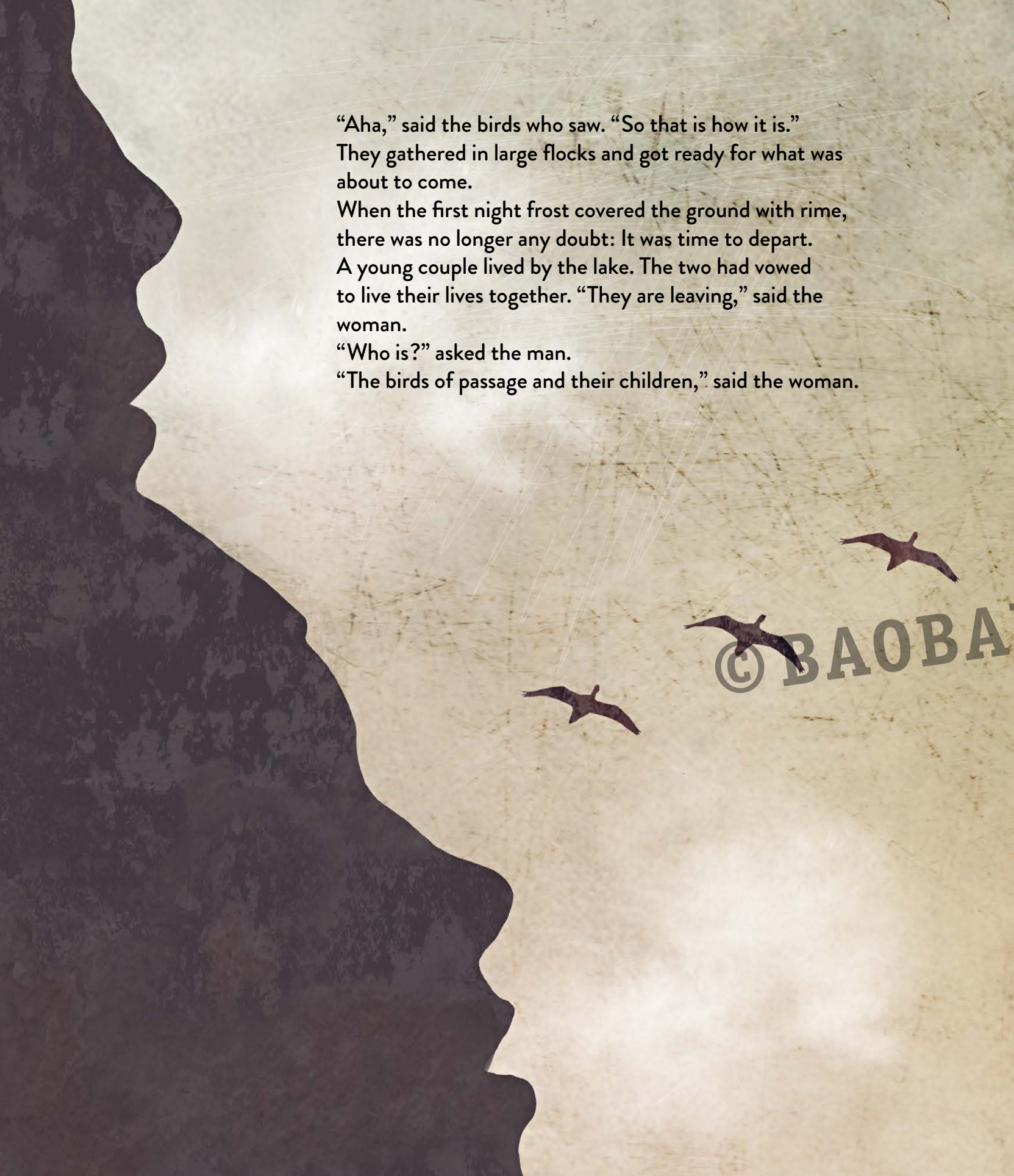
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The midge was the first to notice. She buzzed and sang out in a small, thin voice. But only the bear listened. “Ah,” he nodded, sniffing the air. “I see. So that’s how it is.”

To get ready, he wandered into the forest.
There was a spot only he knew. On his way, he bumped
into a tree, and a leaf came off one of the highest
branches. It sailed to the ground quietly, and no one
noticed. But the wind lifted it up a let it land
on the shore of a lake.

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“Aha,” said the birds who saw. “So that is how it is.”
They gathered in large flocks and got ready for what was about to come.

When the first night frost covered the ground with rime, there was no longer any doubt: It was time to depart. A young couple lived by the lake. The two had vowed to live their lives together. “They are leaving,” said the woman.

“Who is?” asked the man.

“The birds of passage and their children,” said the woman.

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Then on came the north wind and blew out daylight,
sweeping down the mountainside.
“Out of my way,” he blustered. “I’m bringing in winter!”

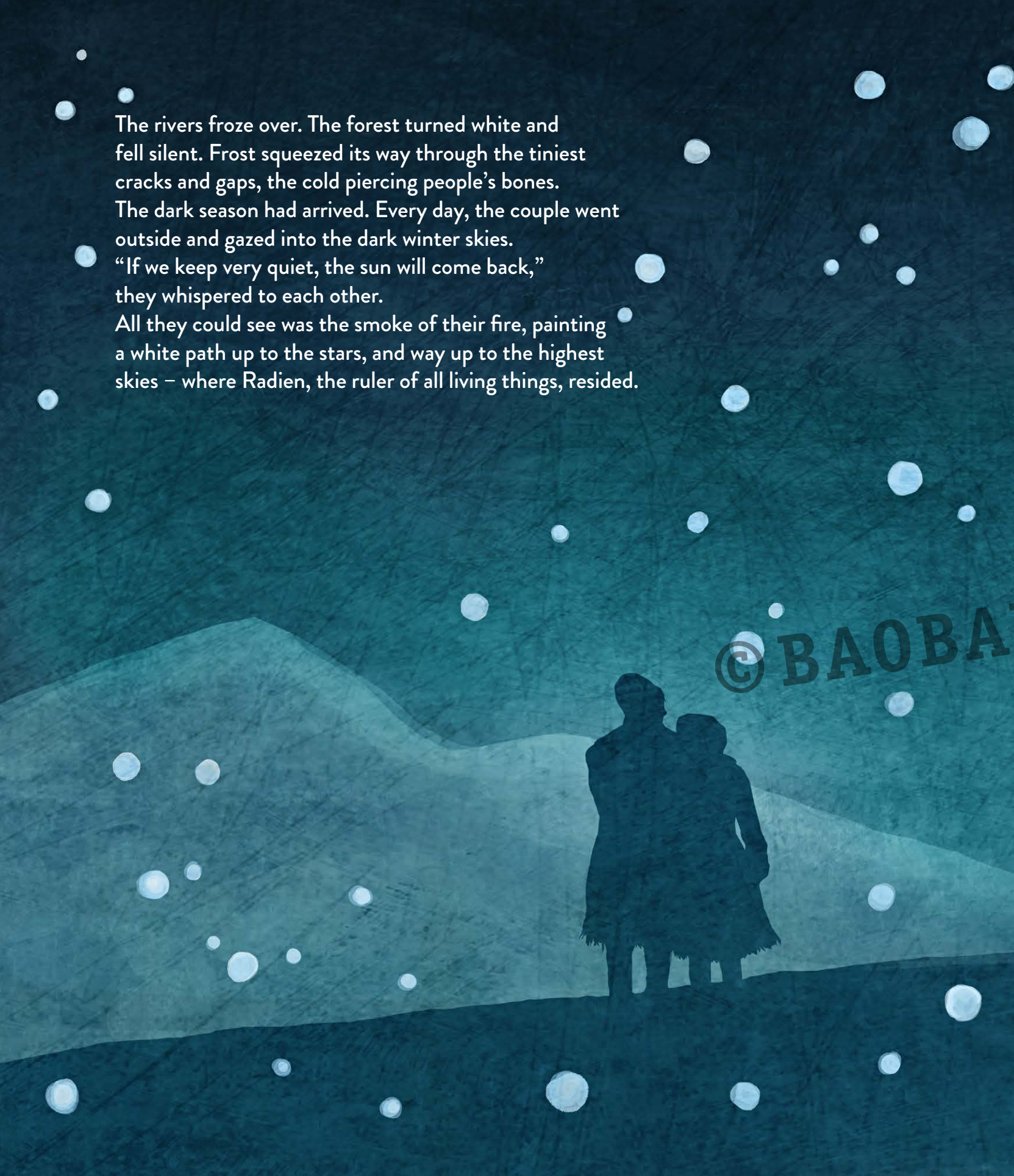
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The rivers froze over. The forest turned white and fell silent. Frost squeezed its way through the tiniest cracks and gaps, the cold piercing people's bones. The dark season had arrived. Every day, the couple went outside and gazed into the dark winter skies.

"If we keep very quiet, the sun will come back," they whispered to each other.

All they could see was the smoke of their fire, painting a white path up to the stars, and way up to the highest skies – where Radien, the ruler of all living things, resided.



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Radien made sure that all other gods did what they did best.
Especially, when a new life was about to come into the world.
That was a difficult task, and much could go wrong.
Therefore, the gods had to work together.

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Radien had given a very special power to his son, the power to create the beginning of life, the first small breath of any being. Maybe he used his hands to do this, maybe his breath. No one will ever know. When he was done, he called for Máttaráddjá, the forefather. “I see,” said Máttaráddjá. “So that’s how it is.”

The forefather then circled the sun. He was travelling along the four strongest rays that ran through the skies like straps, when suddenly, something happened! The warm sunlight sparked life, and the small breath filled with strength and force. Next to the fourth ray, someone was waiting for him.




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It was Máttaráhkká, the foremother.
Máttaráddjá placed the stirring life into her hands.
“Who will this become?” she wondered.
“A bear cub? A person? Or a reindeer calf, maybe?”
As she was wondering, there was a small cracking
sound, as if something had been broken.
“Ah,” she said. “So that’s how it is.”
She sealed the life seedling in her belly and let
a body grow from it. Head, hands, and feet.
A beating heart. Just all that was needed.
Máttaráhkká was the only one who could do this.

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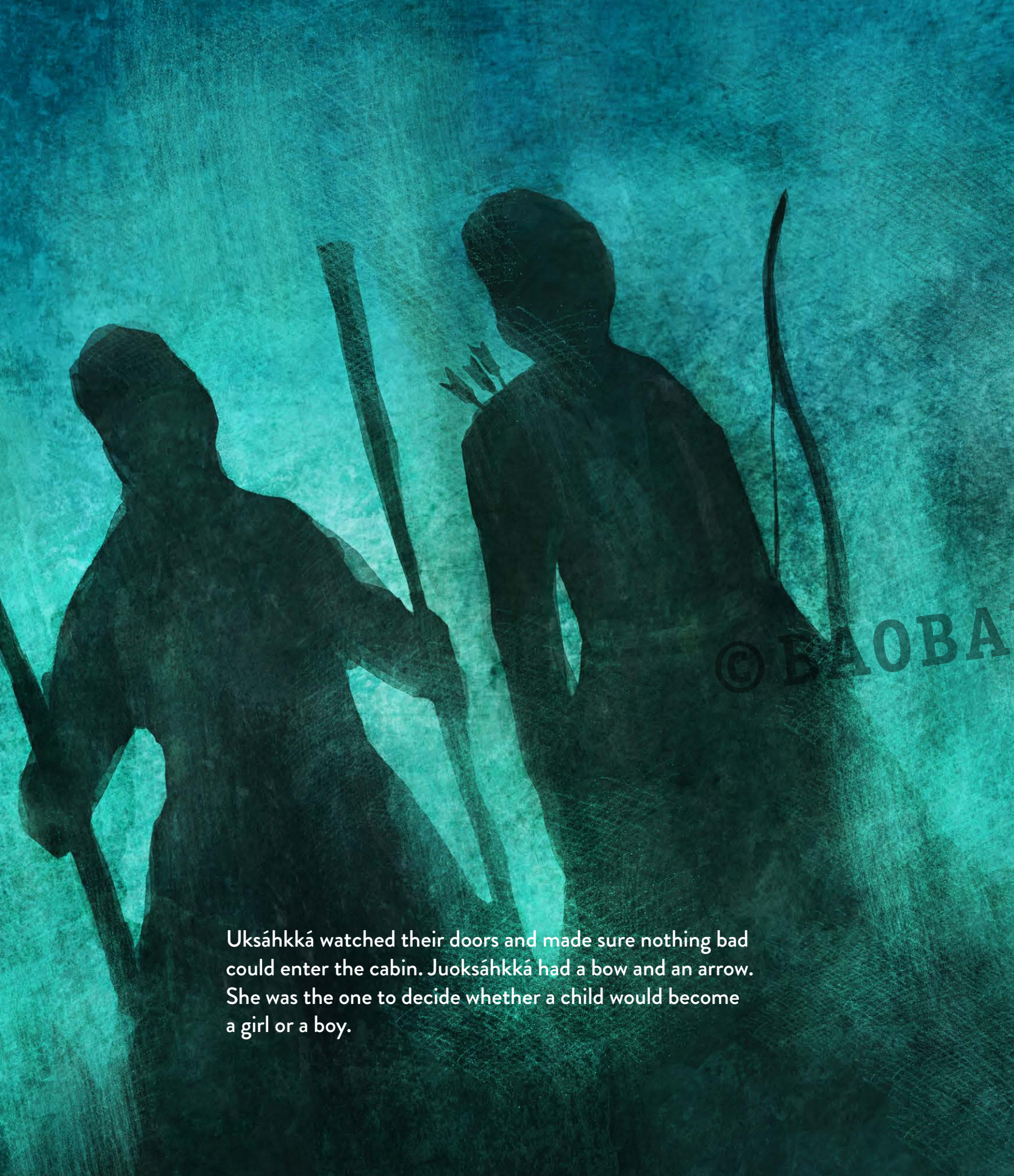


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The background is a dark blue, textured surface with a diagonal silver line running from the top left towards the bottom right. Scattered throughout are various symbols: small white stars, larger blue stars, blue crosses, blue circles, and a large blue circle with a vertical line through it. A white, flame-like shape is positioned on the right side, with a small white light source at its base.

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Máttaráhkká followed the ray of sun that lead down to earth. Her journey was perilous. She made detours, careful not to let anyone follow her. Finally, far down below, she spotted the glow of the fire in the cabin by the lake. Her daughters – Juoksáhkká, Uksáhkká and Sáráhkká – were waiting for her. The three sisters kept close to human beings, helped and protected them.



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Uksáhkká watched their doors and made sure nothing bad could enter the cabin. Juoksáhkká had a bow and an arrow. She was the one to decide whether a child would become a girl or a boy.



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Sáráhkká watched over fire. Sitting by the fire pit, she spun the tendinous chord she needed to fasten the sun ray. So that not only light and warmth would find their way down to earth but also emerging life. When women gave birth, Sáráhkká was at their side and protected them.

That night, the woman in the cabin was roused by voices.

“It’s a boy,” she heard someone say.

“No, Juoksáhkká,” objected another voice firmly.

“It’s a girl, I am sure of it!”

“You’ll have to agree on one or the other,” a third voice said by the door.

“Take another look,” a fourth voice said. A voice as old as time.

“Who’s there,” asked the woman.

“Don’t be afraid,” the voice by the fire pit said.

“I am Sáráhká. I am here to protect you. My sisters and I will help you, when the time comes.”

“Is anybody there,” asked the man, now awake, as well.

They both looked around, but they couldn’t see anyone.

“You must have had a dream,” the man said.

“Ah, that’s how it must have been.”

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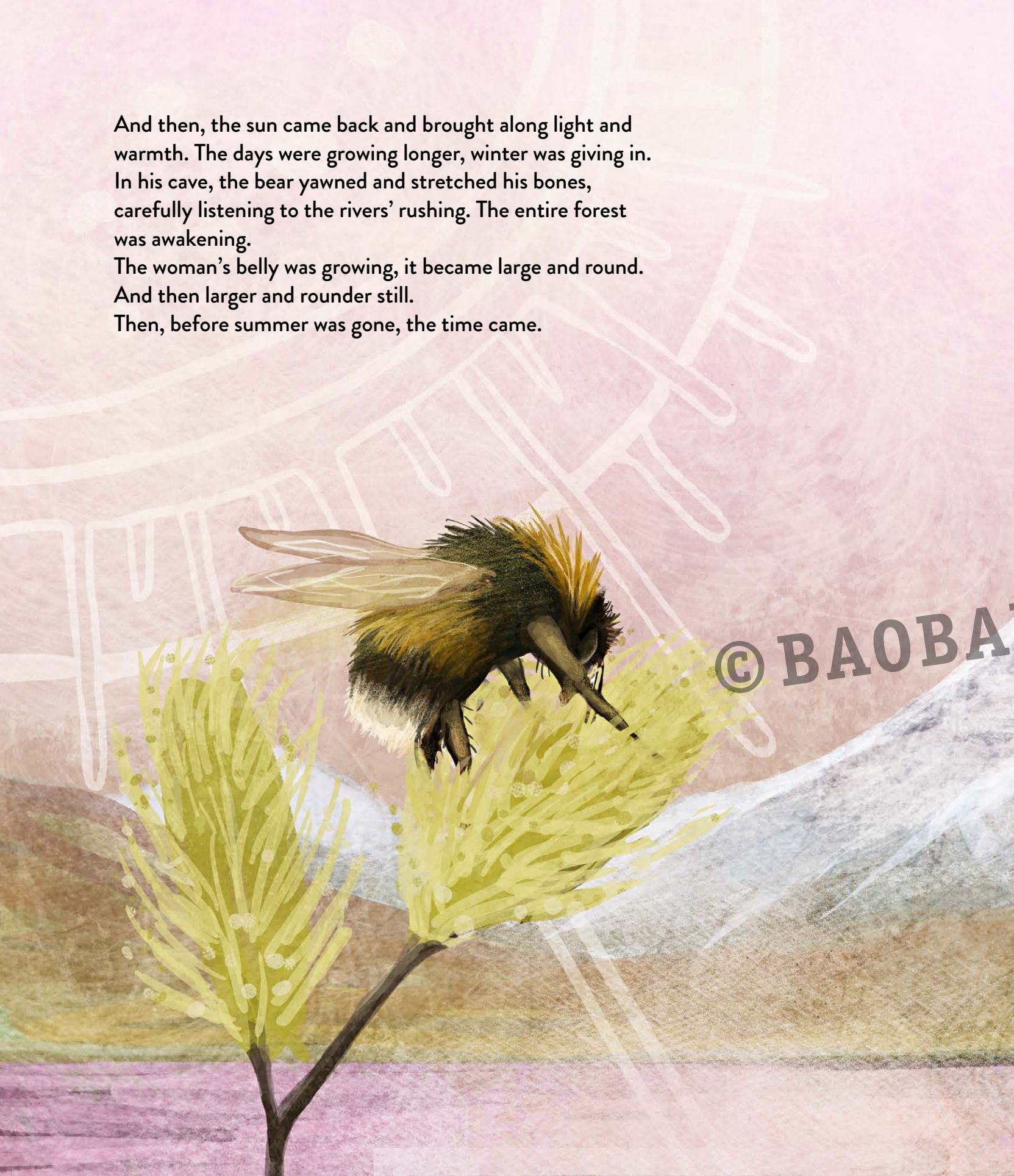
A woman wearing a dark hijab is sitting up in bed, looking towards the left. Her hands are clasped in her lap. Beside her, another person is lying down, appearing to be asleep. The background is a dark, textured blue with glowing, wispy white lines. The text "B BOOKS" is overlaid on the left side of the image.

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And then, the sun came back and brought along light and warmth. The days were growing longer, winter was giving in. In his cave, the bear yawned and stretched his bones, carefully listening to the rivers' rushing. The entire forest was awakening.

The woman's belly was growing, it became large and round. And then larger and rounder still.

Then, before summer was gone, the time came.



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The woman untied the laces of her belt and
her shoes.

“Ah,” said the man. “The time has come.”

Two children were born in their cabin.

First, there was a girl, and then, there was a boy.

Twins!

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A woman with dark hair is shown in profile, kissing a baby on the forehead. The baby is lying down, and the woman's hand is gently resting on the baby's back. The background is a warm, yellowish-gold color with faint, stylized drawings of flowers and crosses. The overall mood is tender and intimate.

At that exact moment, a midge was landing on a blueberry in the forest. It sat there quietly, listening.

“Can you hear my children’s singing,” the midge asked the bear who was eating blueberries off the bush.

They use their wings to sing the song of life.”

“Ah,” grumbled the bear. “Is that how it is?”

And that was exactly how it was.

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Postscript

The story in this book is a story from the Far North, from where the Sami people live. Their country, Sápmi, stretches across Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. National borders, as we know them today, are relatively new. The Sami have lived in Sápmi long before they were determined. They call themselves Sami and speak Sami languages in addition to the various national languages.

The Sami live by the seaside, in forests, or in tundra areas. For thousands of years, they were fishermen, hunters, and gatherers, and they migrated with their reindeer herds from one area to another, according to seasons. Their way of life and the landscapes they lived in shaped their spirituality. They had many sacred places, such as mountains, rocks, stones, waters, or waterfalls. Sacred sites could also be created by people. Spiritual beings inhabited such sites, and the Sami took care to approach them in a respectful manner.

Some Sami continue to live their lives according to ancient traditions to this day, others now live in cities. Not all of them still speak a Sami language, because for some time, the Sami were forced to adopt the national language of the country they lived in. In recent years, however, Sami culture and languages have been revived, fortunately. And many of the old traditions and stories have survived.

Máttaráhkká's Journey introduces you to the world of the Sami gods and goddesses. In her story, Sissel Horndal refers in particular to the storytelling of the Lule Sami, to which she belongs.

There are many versions of the myth about how life comes to be. They may differ, but they all agree on the concept of male and female beings working together. Máttaráhkká and Máttaráddjá do not directly interfere with the lives of humans. Their three daughters, however, are very close to people. The ending of their names, "áhkká", means "old woman" and is a respectful form of address. Sáráhkká is the protector of families. Uksáhkká guards doors and

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watches over small children. Juoksáhká, the woman with the bow, determines who will become a skilful shooter.

The bond between humans and nature has always been pivotal. In earlier times, it was essential for people to be able to carefully observe animals, for instance. Their behaviour often offered vital information. Bears had a special status and were considered sacred. To the Sami it was a sign of good fortune, when a bear lived nearby. They were convinced that bears understand their language and could hear what people were thinking. Natural phenomena, thunder or wind, for instance, were viewed as beings. And so was the sun, of course: Its power has always been existential, as the story in this book demonstrates.

Elisabeth Berg

The author thanks Anna Westman Kuhmunen from Ájtte Museum of Sami Culture in Sweden for all good advice and conversations.



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Máttaráhkkás weite Reise

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When the autumn wind approaches, the bear wanders into the forest, birds gather in large flocks, and daylight disappears. People fall silent and look up to the stars, up to the dark Nordic skies, where divine beings live. The gods in this story have an important task: A new life is to come into the world. They all work together and send it on its journey along a ray of sun down to earth. And then, in summer, when the snow has gone and the first berries are ready to be eaten, the time comes ...

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