

NEW
ICELANDIC
WORKS
IN
ENGLISH
TRANSLATION



ICELANDIC LITERATURE CENTER

Miðstöð íslenskra bókmennta



SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME
By Yrsa Sigurðardóttir
Hodder 2013/UK

A young man with Down's Syndrome has been convicted of burning down his care home and killing five people, but a fellow inmate at his secure psychiatric unit has hired Thora to prove Jakob is innocent. If he didn't do it, who did? And how is the multiple murder connected to the death of Magga, killed in a hit and run on her way to babysit?

Someone to Watch Over Me is the fifth Thóra Gudmundsdóttir novel from Yrsa Sigurðardóttir in English translation.



THE SHIP
By Stefán Máni
Murdoch Books 2012

The ship is the *Per Se*, a merchant vessel bound for exotic Suriname, a world away from the bitter rain and treacherous seas of Iceland. Each of the nine crew members carries a secret — some even have blood on their hands — but none realises that this may be their final voyage.



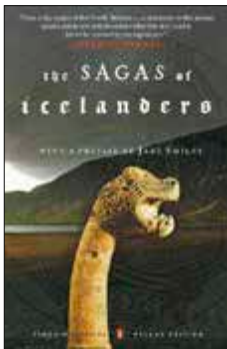
THE SEASON OF THE WITCH
By Árni Þorarinsson
Translated from Icelandic by Anna Yates.
Amazon Crossing 2012/US

When the editors at Reykjavik-based *The Afternoon News* decide to expand the newspaper into northern Iceland—with their crime writer Einar as its sole reporter on location—the journalist feels as though he has stepped back in time. So it's only fitting that one of Einar's first assignments is to cover a college theater production of *Lofgurðir the Sorcerer*, an Icelandic folktale of ambition and greed.



BLACK SKIES
By Arnaldur Indriðason
Translated from Icelandic by Victoria Cribb.
Harvill Secker 2012/UK

A man is making a crude leather mask with an iron spike fixed in the middle of the forehead. It is a 'death mask', once used by Icelandic farmers to slaughter calves, and he has revenge in mind. Moving from the villas of Reykjavik's banking elite to a sordid basement flat, *Black Skies* is a story of greed, pride and murder from one of Europe's most successful crime writers. *Black Skies* is Arnaldur Indriðason's tenth novel in English translation.



THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS
Edited by Örnólfur Thorsson
Introduction by Jane Smiley. Penguin Classics.

In Iceland, the age of the Vikings is also known as the Saga Age. A unique body of medieval literature, the Sagas rank

with the world's great literary treasures – as epic as Homer, as deep in tragedy as Sophocles, as engagingly human as Shakespeare.

The 10 Sagas and seven shorter tales in this volume include the celebrated "Vinland Sagas," which recount Leif Eiriksson's pioneering

voyage to the New World and contain the oldest descriptions of the North American continent.



THE FLATEY ENIGMA
By Viktor Arnar
Ingólfsson

*Translated from Icelandic
by Brian FitzGibbon.
Amazon Crossing 2012/
US*

Near a deserted island off the western coast of Iceland in 1960, the dawning of spring brings new life for the local wildlife. But for the body discovered by three seal hunters, winter is a matter of permanence. After it is found to be a missing Danish cryptographer, the ensuing investigation uncovers a mysterious link between the researcher and a medieval manuscript known as The Book of Flatey.

Also by Viktor Arnar
Ingólfsson in English
translation:

HOUSE OF EVIDENCE
*Translated by Björg Árna-
dóttir / Andrew Cauthery
Amazon Crossing 2012/US*



**THE PERFECT
LANDSCAPE**
By Ragna
Sigurdárdóttir

*Translated from Icelandic
by Sarah Bowen. Amazon
Crossing 2012/US*

When a wealthy patron donates a valuable landscape painting to Reykjavik's art museum, the staff can hardly believe its luck. But when the museum's conservator suggests the painting might be a fake, Hanna, a newly arrived art theorist, realizes the museum's reputation is not the only one in danger of crumbling. What Hanna doesn't know she vows to learn, venturing deep into the shadowy world of art forgery. Only then will she be able to strip away the varnish of the past to uncover the truth.

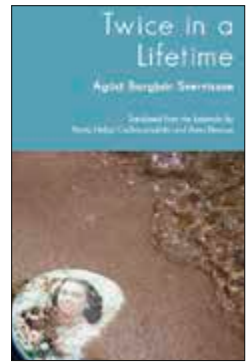


**THE HITMAN'S GUIDE
TO HOUSECLEANING**
By Hallgrímur Helgason

*Amazon Crossing 2012/
US*

With some 66 hits under his belt, Tomislav Bokšić, or Toxic, has a flawless record as hitman for the Croatian mafia in New York. That is, until he kills the wrong guy and is forced to flee the States, leaving behind the life he knows and loves. Suddenly, he finds himself on a plane hurtling toward Reykjavik, Iceland, borrowing the identity of an American televangelist named Father Friendly. With no means of escape from this island devoid of gun shops and contract killing, tragicomic hilarity ensues as he is forced to come to terms with his bloody past and reevaluate his future.

Also by Hallgrímur
Helgason in English
translation:
101 REYKJAVÍK
Scribner 2007/UK



TWICE IN A LIFETIME
By Ágúst Borgþór
Sverrisson

*Translated from Icelandic
by María Helga Guð-
mundsdóttir and Anne
Behassi.
Comma Press 2011/UK*

As a birthday treat to herself, a young woman decides to dial one of two numbers in the phone-book that may belong to her estranged father. A successful business man tries to scheme his way out of a paternity test by offering his less fortunate brother a deal he cannot refuse. Each of Sverrisson's stories is a study in the precariousness of life, the frailty of memory, and the transitory nature of all opportunity.



GUNNLÔTH'S TALE
By Svava Jakobsdóttir

Translated from Icelandic by Oliver Watts. Norvik Press 2011/UK

In the 1980s, a hardworking Icelandic businesswoman and her teenage daughter Dis, who has been arrested for apparently committing a strange and senseless robbery, are unwittingly drawn into a ritual-bound world of goddesses, sacrificial priests, golden thrones, clashing crags and kings-in-waiting. This spirited and at times sinister novel ensnares the reader in a tangled encounter between modern-day Scandinavia and the ancient world of myth.



BLOODHOOF
By Gerður Kristný

Translated from Icelandic by Rory McTurk. ARC Publications 2012/UK

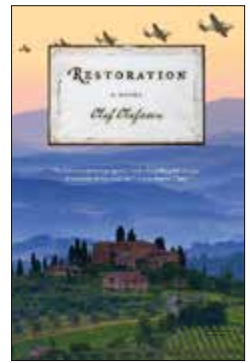
Bloodhoof is the recasting into compulsively spare modern verse of an ancient Eddic poem - but this only begins to hint at its attractions. It is a minimalist epic telling of the abduction of Gerdur Gymisdóttir from the land of giants to the court of Freyr of the 'wolf-grey eyes', and the subsequent events culminating in the birth of her son and her hopes of being saved by her own kin.



LOVESTAR
By Andri Snær Magnason

Translated from Icelandic by Victoria Cribb. Seven Stories Press 2012/US

LoveStar, the enigmatic and obsessively driven founder of the LoveStar corporation, has unlocked the key to transmitting data via birdwaves, thus freeing mankind from wires and devices, and allowing consumerism, technology, and science to run rampant over all aspects of daily life. Indridi and Sigrid, two blissfully happy young lovers, have their perfect worlds threatened (along with Indridi's sanity) when they are "calculated apart" and are forced to go to extreme lengths to prove their love.



RESTORATION
By Olaf Olafsson

Translated from Icelandic by Victoria Cribb. Ecco/HarperCollins 2012/US

Having grown up in an exclusive circle of wealthy British ex-pats in Florence in the 1920s, Alice Orsini shocks everyone when she marries the son of a minor Italian landowner and begins restoring San Martino, a crumbling villa in Tuscany, to its former glory. But after years of hard work, filling the acres with orchards, livestock, and farmhands, Alice's growing restlessness pulls her into the heady social swirl of wartime Rome and a reckless affair that will have devastating consequences. *Restoration* is Olaf Olafson's fifth novel in English translation.

Also by Andri Snær in English translation:
THE STORY OF THE BLUE PLANET
Seven Stories Press 2012/US



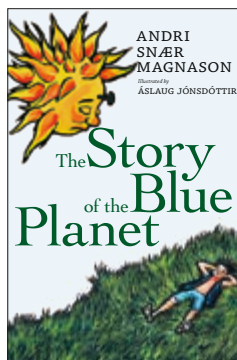
THE CREATOR

By Guðrún Eva Mínervudóttir

Translated from Icelandic by Sarah Bowen. Portobello Books 2012/ UK

Sveinn is a reclusive, middle-aged bachelor who devotes his life to creating and selling beautiful custom-made sex dolls. Loa is a divorced mother of two, whose eldest daughter's increasing isolation is giving her real cause for concern. Their lives collide on the evening when Loa's car breaks down outside Sveinn's house.

Funny, and touching, and never far from tragedy, *The Creator* is an affectingly original story of an unlikely friendship and an unlikely cure for the problem of never quite feeling real.



THE BLUE PLANET

By Andri Snær Magnason

Translated from Icelandic by Julian Meldon D'Arcy. Seven Stories Press 2012/ US

On a blue planet far out in space there are no adults, only children, who play when they want to and go to sleep when they are tired. Then a mysterious man lands on the planet, and teaches them how to fly when the sun shines, by flicking the dust off butterflies' wings. A perilous adventure ensues, taking the children through dark forests and skies of blue. Their friendship and ingenuity are put to the test as never before.

Also by Andri Snær in English translation:
LOVESTAR
Seven Stories Press
2012/US



ON THE COLD COASTS

By Vilborg Davíðsdóttir

Translated from Icelandic by Alda Sigmundsdóttir. Amazon Crossing 2012/ US

The year is 1419. Ragnfridur and Thorkell are betrothed as children, by decision of their highranking parents. But Ragnfridur becomes pregnant by an English castaway, and after this Thorkell leaves to study at the Sorbonne in Paris. While he is away, unrest grows in Iceland. The Norwegian authorities feel threatened by the growing English presence in Iceland. When Thorkell returns, and falls in with the English bishop of Holar, he meets up with the bishop's housekeeper, Ragnfridur, and her young son ...



THE GREENHOUSE

By Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir

Translated from Icelandic by Brian FitzGibbon. Amazon Crossing 2011/ US.

For Lobbi, the tragic passing of his mother proves to be a profound catalyst. Their shared love of tending rare roses in her greenhouse inspires him to leave his studies behind and travel to a remote village monastery to restore its once fabulous gardens. While transforming the garden under the watchful eye of a cinophile monk, he is surprised by a visit from Anna, a friend of a friend with whom he shared a fateful moment in his mother's greenhouse, and the daughter they together conceived that night.



CHILDREN IN REINDEER WOODS

By Kristín Ómarsdóttir

Translated from Icelandic by Lytton Smith. Open Letter Books 2012/US

Eleven-year-old Billie lives at a 'temporary home for children' called Children in Reindeer Woods, which she discovers one afternoon, to her surprise, is in a war zone. When a group of paratroopers kill everyone who lives there, and then turn on each other, Billie is forced to learn to live with the violent, innocent, and troubled Rafael, who decides to abandon the soldier's life and become a farmer, no matter what it takes.



IS THIS SOME KIND OF JOKE?

By Huguileikur Dagsson

Penguin Books 2008/US

Huguileikur Dagsson is the most famous cartoonist in Iceland. Iceland is very cold, very bleak and very expensive. The only things to do there are drink and kill whales. He hopes you like this one. Otherwise he'll have to kill some whales.

Also by Huguileikur in English translation: IS THIS SUPPOSED TO BE FUNNY?

Penguin Books, 2007.

SHOULD YOU BE LAUGHING AT THIS?

Penguin Books, 2006.



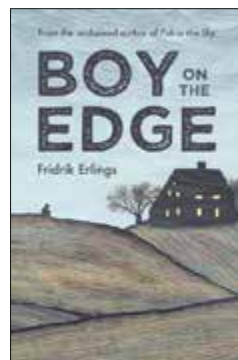
REPLY TO A LETTER FROM HELGA

By Bergsveinn Birgisson

Translated from Icelandic by Philip Roughton.

Amazon Crossing 2013/US

Bjarni has long held onto a letter from former lover Helga, with whom he shared an illicit, impassioned love and whom invited him to leave his wife and his farm and follow her to the city. Years later, as he reflects on a long and simple life shepherding in the Icelandic hillsides, he finally finds himself ready to explain why.



BOY ON THE EDGE

By Friðrik Erlingsson

Meadowside Children's Books 2012/UK

Angry and disturbed, Henry is sent to a home for troubled boys in the middle of nowhere. There, he struggles with loss and loneliness. Yet in this most unlikely of places, he discovers kindness, hope and the most important of all: friendship.

Other works in English by Friðrik Erlingsson:

FISH IN THE SKY / Meadowside Books 2008/UK and BENJAMIN DOVE / North-South Books 2007/US



THE BLUE FOX

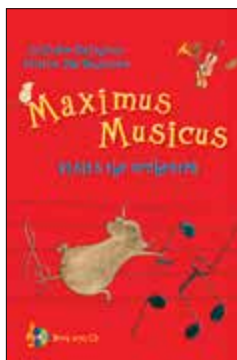
By Sjón

Translated by Vicky Cribb. Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2013/US

"When I need something epic and lyrical I call upon Sjón ... The Blue Fox is a magical novel."

– Björk





MAXIMUS MUSICUS VISITS THE ORCHESTRA

By Hallfríður Ólafsdóttir and Þórarinn Már Baldursson

Translated from Icelandic by Daði Kolbeinsson. Music Word Media Group 2012/US

In Maximus Musicus Visits the Orchestra, Iceland's best-loved musical mouse discovers the wonders of music and the symphony orchestra in his own joyful and charming manner. (Includes audio CD).



WHAT SHOULD I FEED MY BABY?

By Ebba Guðný

How to Books Ltd. 2013/UK

What should I feed my baby? is a simple but thorough guide for parents who want to introduce their baby to wholesome and nutritious food right from the start.



SWEET DREAMS

Sleep and sleeping habits from birth till the age of two

By Arna Skúladóttir

Translated from Icelandic by Ian Watson. Carrol & Brown 2012/UK

In Sweet Dreams, pediatric nurse and sleep specialist, Arna Skúladóttir, brings us into a baby's world and explores it through the lens of sleep. She discusses ways to improve sleep habits, how to solve sleep problems, and what role parents play in establishing and maintaining good sleep habits in their babies and small children.

FROM THE MOUTH OF THE WHALE

By Sjón

Translated by Vicky Cribb. Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2013/US

"From the Mouth of the Whale is strange and wonderful, an epic made mad, made extraordinary." – Junot Díaz



THE WHISPERING MUSE

By Sjón

Translated by Vicky Cribb. Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2013/US

"A quirky, melodic, ticklish, seamlessly translated, lovingly polished gem of a novel."

– David Mitchell

UPCOMING ICELANDIC TITLES IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

DAYBREAK

By Viktor Arnar Ingólfsson

Amazon Crossing 2013/US (May, 2013)

THE SORROW OF ANGELS

By Jón Kalman Stefánsson

MacLehose Press 2013/UK (July, 2013)

THE LAST DAYS OF MY MOTHER

By Sölvi Björn Sigurðsson

Open Letter Books 2013/US (September, 2013)

STRANGE SHORES

By Arnaldur Indriðason

Harvill Secker 2013/UK (September, 2013)

BUTTERFLIES IN NOVEMBER

By Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir

Pushkin Press 2013/UK (November, 2013)

HEART'S PLACE

by Steinunn Sigurðardóttir

Amazon Crossing 2013/US

GERPLA / THE HAPPY WARRIORS

By Halldór Laxness

Archipelago Press 2013/US

THE THAW

By Ólafur Gunnarsson

New American Press 2013/US

From Sagas to Novels

By *Dagný Kristjánsdóttir*

professor of modern Icelandic Literature at the University of Iceland

From Sagas to Novels

Where to begin when describing Icelandic literature? Should the story start in the year 1000 when, according to the Icelandic scholar Sigurður Nordal, the *Völuspá* – one of the most beautiful and dramatic poems in Old Norse literature – was composed in Iceland? Whatever the case may be, it is certainly not possible to ignore medieval Icelandic literature, which has not only played a major role in the history of the nation but is also Iceland’s chief contribution to world culture.

Saga Noregskonunga (*The History of the Kings of Norway*) was written in Iceland. The Icelandic sagas were written in the 13th and 14th centuries and are unique for many different reasons. They are not structured like chronicles or local legends; instead they are stylistically more akin to modern novels and their stories are told with great artistry. No one knows who wrote these books. The sagas tell of the settlement of Iceland and the division of the land between families, the establishment of law and the structuring of society, and conflicts based on personal interests or honor. These conflicts often developed into complicated patterns of violence and retribution, culminating historically in a full-blown civil war in the 13th century, which led to Iceland’s coming under the control of Norway and later Denmark. Iceland was a Danish colony for more than six centuries, but during that entire time Icelanders continued to copy, read, and discuss the old sagas.

During Iceland’s struggle for independence in the 19th century, its politicians realized the possibilities of using the country’s medieval literature for political purposes. In order to prove that the colony had cultural value of which it could be proud, these politicians and others

pointed to the Icelandic sagas to show that during Iceland’s early days of independence its men had been valiant heroes and its women beautiful and proud, and that the sun had shone continually on this exemplary state. Little by little the ties between Iceland and Denmark loosened; Iceland attained sovereignty in 1918 and finally complete independence in 1944. Shortly after Iceland’s sovereignty was recognized, Þórbergur Þórðarson (1888–1974) published a novel that was as far removed from an Icelandic saga as could possibly be. It was characterized by a new “subjectivity”; modernity had come to stay. Þórbergur Þórðarson’s novel was *Bréf til Láru* (*Letter to Lára*, 1924), a hybrid text that combined letters, essays, short stories, fantasy, and humor. In place of the objective style of the Icelandic sagas, this novel displayed a subjective, unruly self-expression that put Icelandic readers ill at ease.

Around the same time, another very young Icelandic writer, Halldór Laxness (1902–1998), wrote a letter to a friend of his in which he declared that he knew of no type of writing more boring or obsolete as the works of Snorri Sturluson and other medieval writers; the Icelandic sagas were primitive concoctions of no relevance to the modern world. Laxness believed he had urgent business with his contemporaries, as can be seen in his novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (*The Great Weaver from Kashmir*, 1927), which describes a young man’s passionate search for himself, a search that takes him across Europe and ends with him rejecting the confused and crazy world, becoming a Catholic and entering a monastery. Halldór Laxness wrote the book for the most part in Taormina in Sicily. *The Great Weaver from Kashmir* was supposed to be Laxness’s ode to the Catholic Church, but with this book he in fact wrote himself off from the Church. The next that Icelanders heard from him was after he had travelled to Los Angeles and become a communist; now he busied himself with preaching to his countrymen about materialism and scientific socialism.

Þórbergur Þórðarson and Halldór Laxness dominated the landscape of Icelandic literature for a major part of the 20th century, and both had strong opinions as to what Icelandic culture was or should be.

During the Depression and WWII Halldór Laxness produced one great literary work after another; he wrote about Salka Valka, a female fish worker in a seaside village; the farmer Bjartur of Summerhouses, a farm on an isolated heath; the popular poet Ólafur Kárason and the female laborer Uglja, who travels from the north

to Reykjavik and witnesses the chaos and cultural inequalities of the city in the wake of the war. By this time Laxness had completely changed his views on his country’s medieval literature. Iceland’s literary heritage had been used to strengthen national pride during the country’s struggle for independence and thus became closely connected with Icelanders’ newly-developed patriotic con-sciousness; the Icelandic sagas represented the origin of this heritage and were accorded the status of sacred texts. Laxness and his friends were very interested in reclaiming medieval Icelandic literature from the clutches of the nationalists and published several of the sagas with modern spelling for the general public, underlining the fact that the sagas were a living literature.

This worked in an interesting way, since the existential sympathies of the Icelandic sagas and their objective, concise narrative method fell in well with literary trends of the post-war years; the sagas’ style was not dissimilar to that of Hemingway, among other modern authors. In 1952 Halldór Laxness then published his own Icelandic saga, the novel *Gerpla* (*The Happy Warriors*, 1952), which tells of two friends, the hero and the poet, who dream of becoming soldiers and courtiers to St. Ólafur, the king of Norway (995–1030). One of the two friends becomes a mercenary in England and finds himself face-to-face with the horrors of murder and the plundering of the Vikings; the other sacrifices everything he holds dear to deliver his poem to the king and express his fealty

to him. By the time the poet finally meets his king he has become richer for the experience and neither the leader nor the praise poem matter any longer. The novel is in part a reckoning with and criticism of the dictators Hitler and Stalin and the soldiers and poets who followed them blindly. It is also Laxness’s reckoning with those who wished to put the saga tradition into the service of a romantic interpretation of the past and nationalism. In 1955 Laxness received the Nobel Prize for infusing medieval Icelandic literature with

It is certainly not possible to ignore medieval Icelandic literature, which is Iceland’s chief contribution to world culture.

new life and new roles through his interpretations and innovations. Halldór Guðmundsson was written a dramatic biography of Halldór Laxness, for which he received the Icelandic Literary Prize in 2005.

Gerður Kristný (1970-) gave readers another dramatic, feminist reckoning with the violent rhetoric of the Icelandic literary heritage in her poetic work *Blóðhófnir* (*Bloodhoof*, 2010), which was awarded the Icelandic Literary Prize in 2010. In an intense, powerful narrative poem, Gerður reveals the way in which the myth of how the fertility god Freyr steals his bride from her exotic tribe, the giants, is based on violence, coercion and suffering, as seen from the perspective of the maiden.

In 1940 the British occupied Iceland due to the great strategic importance of its location, and in 1941 the Americans took over. The occupation had a huge financial, social, and cultural impact on the country. Signs of this can be seen clearly in the literature of the post-war years, which often expresses either nostalgia for the old farming society or a modernist consciousness of loss, separation,

and both personal and social depression. Modernism appeared as an artistic movement in Iceland in the 1960’s, first in painting, then in poetry and finally in prose literature, and the gap between high and low culture widened.

The writers who upheld modernism in prose were Svava Jakobsdóttir (1930–2004), Thor Vilhjálmsson (1925–2011), and Guðbergur Bergsson (1932–). Svava Jakobsdóttir was a leading figure in the second wave of feminism in Iceland, a journalist, member of parliament, and an author. She was a prolific producer of short stories, plays, and novels, utilizing both irony and grotesque humor in innovative ways. Guðbergur Bergsson followed close on her heels and acheived success with his novel *Tómas Jónsson metsölubók* (*Tómas Jónsson Bestseller*, 1966) which shocked Icelandic readers in innumerable ways, lashing out as it does at Icelandic society of the post-war years for its cultural confusion, amorality, and hypocrisy. The main character is a grumpy old man who speaks and writes in various styles, grumbles and babbles and criticizes everything that appears in his own imaginative world. Guðbergur’s (post) modernist task was to identify the social instabilities in the life of the newly independent postcolonial nation that did not know what it was. Thor Vilhjálmsson was

one of the modernists who changed the Icelandic cultural life in 1960’s, and in his book *Fliótt fljótt sagði fuglinn* (*Quick Quick, Said the Bird*, 1968) he reveals a new and splintered worldview that nevertheless has its foundation in the old myths, folktales, and ancient saga motifs. Thor’s novels were cosmopolitan, restless, and often under the influence of new films, while in the 1980’s his focus turned to Iceland, the setting for the dramatic novel *Grámosinn glóir* (*Justice Undone*, 1986), which earned Thor the Nordic Council Literature Prize (1988). In recent years Thor Vilhjálmsson became ever more interested in medieval Icelandic literature, in particular *Sturlunga saga*, and he used its content in novels on the cloven nature of man and his struggles with himself.

Einar Kárason (1955–) has also turned to medieval Icelandic literature and paid homage to the saga heritage in his own way, after having won the hearts and minds of readers with his trilogy on the Quonset-hut neighborhoods of Reykjavik in the 1960’s. He has also tapped into *Sturlunga saga* with the intention of bringing the past into the future. In the novels *Óvinafagnaður* (*Gathering of Foes*, 2001) and *Ofsi* (*Fury*, 2008) he focuses on the conflicts between Icelandic chieftains in the 13th century. The roots of these conflicts lie in the "honor" of the leading figures and in the name of this "honor", envy, rivalry, and hatred grow and come to a climax in revolting mass murder. Einar Már Guðmundsson (1954-) also writes about venomous conflicts, but focuses on the present day in *Hvíta bókin* (*The White Book*, 2009), a work on Iceland’s financial collapse. Many have compared the modern fiscal situation to the power struggles and greed of the Sturlung Age. Einar Már Guðmundsson won the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1995 for *Englar alheimsins* (*Angels of the Universe*, 1993), a powerful, tragicomic novel about a young, schizophrenic artist. The film director Friðrik Þór Friðriksson made a splendid film based on this novel.

In 1955 Laxness received the Nobel Prize for infusing medieval Icelandic literature with new life and new roles through his interpretations and innovations.

Icelandic films have flourished over the past twenty years, often deriving their subjects from intriguing contemporary novels. Ágúst Guðmundsson made a film version of the magical realist novel *Mávahlátur* (*The Seagull’s Laughter*, 1995) by Kristín Marja Baldursdóttir (1949–), which

enchanted Icelandic readers with its narrative artistry, powerful characterization, and attention to women’s rights, as did her books about the female artist Karítas (2004 and 2007), which also narrate the history of art in the twentieth century in an intriguing manner. Kristín Marja manages to combine a strong focus on plot with intense characterization. The same can be said for another storyteller, Vigdís Grímsdóttir (1953–), who writes both aesthetically and thematically radical novels about sexuality and death. Ever since the seventies, women have played a strong role in Icelandic literature and changed its form.

Steinunn Sigurðardóttir (1950–) has written in all of the literary genres, and few Icelandic books have attracted as much attention or touched so many emotionally as her novel *Tímaþjófurinn* (*The Thief of Time*, 1986), which tells in a stylistic, "grand passion" of an upper-class spinster. The book is a philosophical, cutting analysis of the obsessive search for happiness. This is also perhaps the central idea behind a short, unpretentious but brilliant novel by Sjón (1962–), in which we follow a fox hunter, except that both the hunter and the fox undergo metamorphosis and their struggle in the white snow is by nature unwinnable, by either of them. This novel, *Skugga-Baldur* (*The Blue Fox*, 2003), earned its author the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 2005.

Sjón first made his mark as a poet; he was one of the main songwriters for the rock band Sugarcubes and is a colleague and friend of Björk Guðmundsdóttir. The same goes for Bragi Ólafsson (1962–), who was the bass player for the Sugarcubes before leaving music and turning to writing. Bragi Ólafsson’s distinctive feature is his subtle, delicate irony that he applies systematically in his novels to shed light on ordinary people in absurd circumstances. Yet another master of the compact form and the unstated is Gyrðir Elíasson (1961–), who received the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 2011 for his short-story collection *Milli trjáanna* (*Between the Trees*, 2009). Gyrðir is both a poet and novelist, known for writing strangely compelling, beautiful and peaceful texts in which there is often an imminent threat, causing the reader to feel that all peace is temporary, that nothing in life comes free and that if the threat does not come from the outside, it comes from within.

Hallgrímur Helgason (1959–) is both a writer and an artist, but his literary hallmarks are eloquence and rich imagery. His books spin together influences from the media and mass culture combined with world literature,

social criticism, and humor. His award-winning novel, *Höfundur Íslands* (*The Author of Iceland*, 2001), is about Halldór Laxness. Hallgrímur, like Laxness, has been an active voice in the social dialogue in Iceland, utilizing all means of communication, from books to Facebook. Auður Jónsdóttir (1973–) is also political, radical, and provocative in her books. She has written a personal account of Halldór Laxness, who was her grandfather. Like so many of the younger writers, Auður is cosmopolitan in outlook and has written about immigrants in Iceland, cultural clashes and "cultural fault" (dislocation). She describes the dark sides of globalization in her novel *Vetrarsól* (*Winter Sun*, 2008). In *Yosoy* (2005), Guðrún Eva Mínervudóttir (1976–) also takes a look at the strange and terrifying aspects of the global consumer society. She tells of an Icelandic "freak show" in the theater Yosoy, where both external and internal pain is put on display. Emotional fridity and loneliness characterize the modern sex industry and both are dealt with by Steinar Bragi (1975–) in his powerful novel *Konur* (*Women*, 2008), which was both praised and debated in Iceland for its cruelty and beauty.

Cruelty is also on the agenda of a complex and compelling work by Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl (1978-): *Illska* (*Evil*, 2012), which won the Icelandic Literary Prize the same year. The novel's narrative is clipped into short scenes, as in a film, allowing it to move rapidly between characters, time periods, and events. The story focuses on three young people in contemporary Reykjavík, and the history of one of them, Agnes, in the village of Jurbarkas in Lithuania, where her ancestors were murdered during the Holocaust. It is ironic that Agnes, the Jew, should fall for the neo-Nazi whom she meets while conducting her research. One of the tasks of this book is to assemble stories of victims and executioners, humanism and dehumanization, first and foremost in order to explore the origins of radical evil.

Reykjavik’s criminal underworld has been mapped by a growing number of writers of crime novels, chief among them Arnaldur Indriðason (1961–). Arnaldur was educated as a historian and uses his knowledge and understanding to unveil crimes that often have their roots in the pasts of individuals and families. The same

goes for Yrsa Sigurðardóttir (1963–), who is trained as an engineer and is particularly adept at building up suspense in her novels.

The novels of Jón Kalman Stefánsson (1963–) look to the vanished rural community with both warmth and humor, and this celebrated stylist manages to combine

In the same way that the writers of the medieval Icelandic sagas told of the origins of society in Iceland and the voyage from the old homeland to the new, contemporary Icelandic authors bring both history and the literary heritage into the modern world and write novels about sagas.

Ólafsdóttir’s novel contains religious allusions to the rose.

Just as medieval poets and scholars traveled from Iceland to the mainland and made pilgrimages to Rome or sailed to Trondheim or Paris to study, Icelandic contemporary authors have made the world their subject. In the same way that the writers of the medieval Icelandic sagas told of the origins of society in Iceland and the voyage from the old homeland to the new, contemporary Icelandic authors bring both history and the literary heritage into the modern world and write novels about sagas.

Further information on Icelandic literature:

WWW.ISLIT.IS

WWW.LITERATURE.IS

WWW.CITYOFLITERATURE.IS

Translated by

Philip Roughton

THE ICELANDIC LITERATURE CENTER is a government-funded foundation which contributes to the promotion and translation of Icelandic literature abroad. Foreign publishers of Icelandic books can apply to the Center for translation subsidies. Authors, publishers and organizers of literary events can apply for support for Icelandic authors travelling abroad to promote their work. The Icelandic Literature Center also subsidizes the publications of works written in Icelandic as well as translations into Icelandic.



THE ICELANDIC LITERATURE CENTER
AUSTURSTRÆTI 18 4TH FLOOR | 101 REYKJAVÍK | ICELAND
+354 552 8500 | WWW.ISLIT.IS