

FABULOUS BOOKS

Bergsveinn Birgisson
Reply to a Letter from Helga

Novel

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bergsveinn Birgisson (b. 1971) published his first novel in 2003, *Landscape is Never Corny* (Landslag er aldrei asnalegt) which received a nomination for the Icelandic Literary Prize the same year.

Bergsveinn's second novel, published in 2009, *Manual on the Mentality of Coms* (Handbók um hugarfar kúa), was described by critics as one of the funniest novels in years.

Bergsveinn has also published three books of poetry. He holds a PhD in Nordic Studies from the University of Bergen, where he currently lives.



AWARDS AND NOMINATIONS

Landscape is Never Corny (Landslag er aldrei asnalegt) received a nomination for the Icelandic Literary Prize in 2003.

Reply to a Letter from Helga (Svar við bréfi Helgu) received the Icelandic Booksellers' Prize as the Best Book of the Year in 2010. It was nominated for the Icelandic Literary Prize and for the 2012 Nordic Council's Literature Prize.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Novels:

Svar við bréfi Helgu, 2010: Bjartur

Handbók um hugarfar kúa: skáldfræðisaga, 2009: Bjartur

Landslag er aldrei asnalegt, 2003: Bjartur

Poetry:

Drauganet, 2011: Bjartur

Innrás liljanna, 1997: Nykur

REPLY TO A LETTER FROM HELGA (2011)

Reply to a Letter from Helga is an epistolary love story, told in lucid, unaffected prose that belies the emotions and desires boiling beneath the surface.

It's the story of a life that never came to pass: An old farmer writes a letter to his old flame, relating how they met, fell in love and ultimately parted ways.

The novel has been adapted to the stage and shown at Reykjavík City Theatre in 2012.

106 pp

INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS

Steidl (Germany), Zulma (France), Amazon Crossing (US), C&K (Denmark), RPA Libros (Spain), AKCENT (Poland) Pelikanen (Norway).

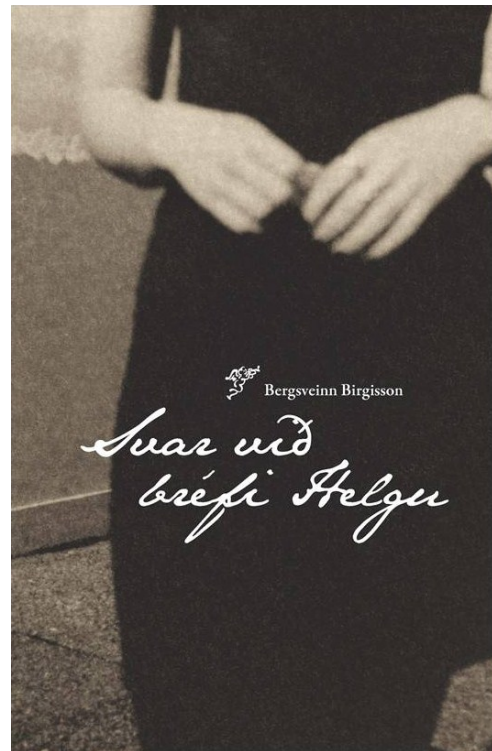
REVIEWS

Reply to a Letter from Helga dynamically describes human desire, pain and despair, and at the same time the joy of life itself. ... This short novel speaks directly to the emotions ... A pure delight to read.” **(Vísjón, Cultural Programme on the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service)**

“A rare jewel where past and present, city and countryside, meet and merge in unrivalled prose.” **(Fréttablaðið, daily newspaper)**

“This wonderful love story goes straight to the reader’s heart.” **(Jyllandsposten, Danish newspaper)**

“Those in want of eroticism should pick up *Reply to a Letter from Helga* rather than *50 Shades of Grey*.” **(Weekend avisen, Danish newspaper)**



FROM THE AUTHOR

(www.sagenhaftes-island.is)

“The old farmer writes a number of letters,” Bergsveinn says, “but they all end up in the same pile. He never sends them. The original letter from Helga, the one he is replying to, must be ancient. But just as cognitive psychology has revealed to us, emotions – or emotionally charged perceptions and thoughts – are what sticks most tenaciously in our memories. Over time, all other abstractions fade from us. That’s why I think they were right back in medieval times – we really do think with our hearts.”

What does framing the story in this very old form, the epistolary novel, achieve?

“Every day, we are inundated with Hollywood love stories that leave everything visible on the surface. I think that in real life, the “repressed” love story, the love story that is never allowed to breach the surface, is just as common. However, it’s more of an untilled field, and it makes us wonder if the actual urge to love isn’t mixed with wishful thinking or self-flagellation. A love story told from within required a first-person, subjective narrative, and the epistolary form was a good way to represent the closeness between the lovers.”

The book contains an abundance of old and exotic vocabulary, especially as related to sheep farming. Did this require a lot of research?

“I was lucky enough to be acquainted early with one particular farm – a full-fledged cultural institution – and its residents. So you might say I’ve been gathering material for the book my entire life, although I began the actual writing in 2003. I did have to hunt down the specific terminology on the old practice of sheep palpating, because that vocabulary vanished when sonar inspections of sheep became customary after 1950. We are talking about very beautiful Icelandic, here, richly descriptive and precise, but apparently not deemed worthy of treasuring. So finding the proper terms took a bit of doing. Those who palpate sheep are inherently more erotic than the those operating a sonar, because the former are forcing their consciousness onto the material world. This has a bearing on the general gist of what thinkers like Slavoj Žižek argue: that we so-called “materialists” of the technological culture are in reality losing our connection with the material world.”

What of the book’s eroticism? Does it stand in opposition to farm life?

“No, it doesn’t. The erotic belongs to all people of all eras. The reason we think of the countryside as inherently un-erotic is that we don’t think of the “polite” anecdotes often associated with farm-types as sensual. However, I noticed early on that a farmer in print is very different from a farmer in person. I often refer to the story of the pagan love poet Kormákur. He composed a poem about glimpsing the bare ankle of the woman he loved. In the poem, he declares that because of this, he’ll burn with desire for the rest of life. To me, that’s real eroticism right there; powerful emotions and urges!”

RIGHTS

Bjartur & Veröld
Brædraborgarstigur 9
IS-101 Reykjavík,
Iceland
Tel:
(+ 354) 414 14 50
For information,
contact gv@bjartur.is



www.bjartur.is

CONTACT

The Icelandic Literature Fund

Austurstræti 18
101 Reykjavík
Iceland
bok@bok.is

www.bok.is

Sagenhaftes Island

Ministry of Science, Education
and Culture
Sölvhólgötu 4
150 Reykjavík
Iceland
Tel: +354 / 545 9451

www.sagenhaftes-island.is



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