ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Best known for his *Devils' Isle* trilogy (published in 1983, 1985 and 1989) Einar Káraón (b. 1955) is one of the most popular authors and scriptwriters of his generation. The trilogy has been adapted to the stage and a motion picture based on the stories, directed by Friðrik Þór Friðriksson, was chosen as the best Nordic film in 1997 at the Norwegian Amanda Awards.

Einar’s novel *Storm* (2003) was nominated for the Nordic Council Literary Prize and the Icelandic Literary Prize and awarded The DV Newspaper Cultural Award as Book of the Year. Einar received the Icelandic Literary Prize for *Fury* (2008), as well as a nomination for the Nordic Council Literary Prize. Einar Káraón has also written travel books and short stories.

Einar’s two latest novels, *A Gathering of Foes* and *Fury*, as well as the forthcoming *Poet* (to be published in autumn 2012), form a trilogy set in 13th century Iceland – the tumultuous, violent, but spectacularly creative era that saw the tiny community torn apart by the bloodiest civil conflict in its history, and yet bequeathed the Icelandic sagas to history. The chaotic, paradoxical nature of the period is perfectly suited to Einar's polyphonic narrative.

TRANSLATIONS

*Fury*, 2008: Mál og menning

Translation rights sold to:

Germany, Austria, Switzerland: Verlagsgruppe Random House
Denmark: Gyldendal

*A Gathering of Foes*, 2001: Mál og menning

Translation rights sold to:

Finland: Johnny Kniga/WSOY
Germany, Austria, Switzerland: Verlagsgruppe Random House
Denmark: Gyldendal

Film rights sold to Friðrik Þór Friðriksson / Spellbound Productions

Einar’s previous works have been sold to Denmark (Gyldendal) Faroe Islands (Árting), Finland (Like), Germany (btb), Netherlands (De bezige bij), Norway (Aschehoug), Poland (Marpress), Sweden (Bonniers) and UK (Canongate).
INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

(www.sagenhaftes-island.is)

The 13th century was one of the most colorful periods in Icelandic history, and the bloodiest. “The Age of the Sturlungs”, named after the most powerful clan of the period and originally described in the Saga of the Sturlungs, was at once a golden era of literature and a time of violent conflict.

Einar Kárason’s historical novel Ofsi (Fury) draws on this tumultuous period. The book, a free-standing sequel to Einar’s Óvinafagnadur (A Gathering of Foes), was first published in Icelandic in 2008.

The book describes the build-up to one of the most infamous and heinous events of The Saga of the Sturlungs, The Flugumýri Arson, during which scores of people burned to death inside the farm of the chieftain Gissur Þorvaldsson. Gissur himself, however, famously escaped the flames unscathed by submerging himself in a barrel of whey.

Although some members of the warring factions attempted to stem the tide of bloodshed, their attempts at reconciliations were ineffectual in the face of the era’s obsession with honor and blood feud, and all negotiations inevitably flared up into continuing violence, as Fury relates.

The narrative of the original Saga of the Sturlungs is matter-of-fact and objective, leaving much of the motives, feelings and experiences of its characters open to speculation. In Fury, however, Einar uses the framework of the historical novel to fill in these blanks, offering his readers a glimpse into the minds of the men and women of this remote and cataclysmic age.

Fury received the Icelandic Literary Prize in 2008 and proved a hit with Icelandic readers. An unexpected side-effect of its popularity was that interest in the original Saga of the Sturlungs was rekindled, causing it to quickly sell out and become unobtainable in book stores.

Tragedy and betrayal, folly and cowardice

How are Fury and A Gathering of Foes connected, and how are they different?

They’re connected in that they both take place in the same era of Icelandic history – they revolve around dramatic events in a civil war that lasted for decades. Their action takes place about ten to fifteen years apart, and they share some minor characters. But A Gathering of Foes is largely a tale of suspense and heroism, while Fury is more concerned with tragedy and betrayal, folly and cowardice.”

The narrative voice in Fury is very distinctive and employs a method from Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying. What made you choose this way of telling the story?

“I used to wonder about the differences between the two major categories of novels: the first-person narratives, and the third-person narratives told by an omniscient voice who observes everything and can relate many simultaneous events. While there are advantages to each method, there are also disadvantages, so I looked for an alternative. The authors of the sagas – including the Saga of the Sturlungs, which is my main source for the books – used third-person narrative and never went inside the heads of their characters. So the inner narrative voice seemed to be an untilled field. And by using Faulkner’s brilliant...
method – the polyphonic narrative – I was free from the constraints of one single viewpoint.

Icelandic novelists seem to have reservations about tackling the sagas. Did you have to adopt a special approach when you began work on Fury?

“Only in that I have infinite respect and admiration for these ancient works of art. This inescapably gives you reservations – you can’t ever mess up, can’t ever be trite or banal. Long after I began working on the book, I had doubts whether the outcome would be good enough to survive the inevitable comparison with the original works. So whatever respect or reservations I had hopefully encouraged hard work and diligence!

What is the difference between the world of the Sagas of the Icelanders and the Saga of the Sturlungs?

The Sagas of the Icelanders mostly take place in the years during and around the settlement of Iceland – from early 9th century to early 11th – but they were probably written in the 13th century – almost 300 years later. The Saga of the Sturlungs was written around the same period, but unlike the Sagas of the Icelanders, it relates contemporary events, major and minor happenings that the authors of the work were often directly involved in.

Therein lies the difference: In the Sagas of the Icelanders, the intervening centuries between the events and the writing erase all minor events and characters. The dust settles, the fog and smoke is blown away. Only heroes and major events remain, bathed in a cold, crisp light.

The Saga of the Sturlungs, on the other hand, includes everything. It’s a jumble of protagonists, pivotal characters and thousands of minor figures with little or no influence on the plot. Momentous events are mixed in with wholly insignificant ones, and sometimes it’s hard follow the story. But that’s how it is in real life, too. You suddenly find yourself in a crowd of strangers, caught up in a chain of events you don’t understand, and you need to figure out for yourself which people of all these multitudes are going to be part of your story, which of the countless subplots are going to have any lasting significance.”
A GATHERING OF FOES (2001)

When news reaches Þórdur Kakali in Norway that his father and brothers, members of the most powerful family in Iceland, the Sturlungar, have been killed by a rival clan, he has few options. After years of drink and gambling, Þórdur has few friends and many debts. When he learns that hired killers are now after him as well, Þórdur decides to face his enemies in Iceland.

The story is divided into roughly seventy short chapters, with shifting narrators and points of view. The narrators’ names appear at the beginning of each chapter. Þórdur, the main character, narrates some thirty chapters, in which he relates the predicaments he finds himself in; other chapters are narrated by his archenemy, Kolbeinn the Young, with the remainder distributed amongst Þórdur’s henchmen, kinsmen and enemies, who also bear witness to the events in the story.

This is a narrative technique which has been used by other novelists, perhaps most famously William Faulkner, in *As I Lay Dying*, and Graham Swift, in *Last orders*.

Storyline available in English.

248 pp

REVIEWS

“Certainly not everyone can tackle as big a theme as revenge and get away with it as well as this.” *(Jyllands-posten, Danish newspaper)*

“Through Kárason’s use of choral narrative technique the final inferno is subtly prepared. The hope that a new war could be prevented, in spite of everything, flares up, over and over again. But Kárason does not intend to rewrite the Sturlunga Saga. What is relevant today about that time and its bloody conflicts lies in the timeless mechanisms of violence, as well as the desire for reconciliation, which are analysed with sensitivity and skill by the author.” *(Deutschlandradio)*

“… A masterful overview and rich talent for insight… Of all Iceland’s contemporary authors Einar Kárason probably preserves and revitalises the heritage of the sagas with the greatest skill.” *(Information, Danish newspaper)*

“Kárason is a storyteller worth his weight in gold, capable of bringing together tragedy and humour – opposites that naturally stand side by side, like two sides of a coin..” *(Huvudstadsbladet, Finnish newspaper)*
**FURY (2008)**

1252 AD. A bloody civil war grips Iceland. Still fresh in men's minds is the confrontation at Örlygsstadir, where two leading members of the Sturlung family, the father Sighvatur and his son Sturla, the family's rising star and heir apparent, were slain by their opponents, led by Gissur Þorvaldsson and Kolbeinn the Younger. Under the apparent calm waters, the thirst for revenge ferments.

Now this same Gissur, leader of the powerful Haukadalur clan, has returned to Iceland as the Norwegian king's envoy. Prompted by the pleasures of home and family, and his hopes for the future, he attempts to make his peace with the Sturlungs. Enough men have been slain. As a token of good faith, he offers to marry his son to daughter of the Sturlung leader and historiographer Sturla Þórðarson. The wedding feast is to be held at his estate at Flugumyri in the autumn of 1253. He plans to make it the most impressive gathering ever to be held in Iceland.

At the fine estate Möðruvellir, just over the mountains to the east, dwells the local hero Eyjólfur Ofsi, a man held in high regard by himself and others. While he is prepared to accept Gissur's outstretched hand, his wife, Sturla Sighvatsson's illegitimate daughter and a valkyrie incarnate, is not about to forgive Gissur her father's and grandfather's deaths. Generous and easy-going in the daytime, Eyjólfur's mood darkens as night falls, and he is plagued by nagging doubts and suspicions. Feelings of inferiority fester like a cancer inside him, leading to a fateful outcome.

*Fury* brings to life the figures of this uniquely tumultuous period in Iceland's history. All give voice to their thoughts, drawing out the common threads of the human condition that enable us to comprehend and experience the time and its people.

192 pp

**REVIEWS**

“Five stars out of five. A well-matured continuation of *Gathering of Foes*, a masterfully crafted work ... Every bit of it superbly done ... *Fury* is evidence of a mature writing talent, and a rare honour in our time.” *(Fréttablaðið, daily newspaper)*

“I think this must rank among Einar Kárason's best works ... he makes a roaring success of it. Along with the high drama there is also humour ... which is what he does best.” *(Kiljan, Icelandic National Television)*

“So much, much, much deeper than a simple retelling.” *(Kiljan, Icelandic National Television)*
EYJÓLFUR

It was the first winter you could say I’d gone into hibernation, though it would happen again later. I had plenty of time to reflect on my situation and fate. Had faced up to the fact that, contrary to what I had hoped, I’d never be thought of as a major player in the conflicts raging in this country. And even though I had cast in my lot with the Sturlungs, I would never really be counted a full-fledged brother in arms. Of course I wasn’t born into the clan, was no blood relation, just a hanger-on who happened to be married to my wife. My position was almost ridiculous, if you thought about it; when I was growing up at Hvammur in Vatnsdalur my own kin, like most people in the Húnavatn district, sided with Kolbeinn the Younger. So much so that my father even fought with Kolbeinn and Gissur at Örlygsstaðir. Who would have believed that I, the son of one of Kolbeinn's own men, would later marry the daughter of the Sturlungs' leader in that battle, the daughter of Sturla Sighvatsson himself, slain that day along with his father and four brothers?

Strangely enough I never saw Sturla's surviving brother, Þórður kakali, until he rode into Vatnsdalur with a band of brigands to take his revenge and had my uncle killed. That was the year before the battle out on the bay Húnaflói, when men feared the bloodthirsty Sturlung murderers as much as they feared eternal damnation; the Sturlungs were the avenging hounds of hell.

Later on, after Þórður kakali emerged as victor and held sway over all of North Iceland, we found out that he was actually a decent guy. He was always good to me and took my side, protected me and stood up for me. Showed both me and my brother Ásgrímur respect, which is more than I can say for many others. We were gradually admitted to his innermost circle, we actually became the friends of this man everyone looked up to. Of course there were those who scoffed at us, sneering that he was only friendly toward Ásgrímur and me to worm his way into our sister Kolfinna’s graces. Every man who set eyes on her wanted her, and she ended up giving birth to Þórður’s daughter. That never so much as occurred to me. On the other hand, there is no denying that it was he who arranged for me to marry Sturla’s daughter Þuríður, this fine wife of mine with a will of her own, who can be as cruel and unruly as men say the high seas are. Gradually Þórður began spending more time with me, showing me the same respect he did his own kinsmen, those born into the Sturlung clan. When he was summoned to the king’s court he did me the honour of picking me here in Skagafjörður, to be one of the men he left looking after his realm.

Once he was gone, though, I realised clearly that I’d never be admitted to the Sturlungs’ inner circle. His cousin Sturla Þórðarson now and then sought the counsel of various other of the family’s leaders, but never mine. I was like a cow pat on the trail left by the high and mighty. In my brighter moments I often told myself I couldn’t care less, they were no doubt cooking up some hopeless ideas or ill-conceived plans. Later on, when I discovered that Hrafn Oddsson was always included in their councils, I have to admit I could only take to my bed and try to keep back the sobs. Hrafn Oddsson is no more of a Sturlung than I am! We’re both in exactly the same shoes as far as that goes, both of us married into the family to one of Sturla Sighvatsson’s own daughters. They even have the same name!

They thought enough of Hrafn, though, to summon him to all their councils, whether
it was to plan how to do away with Gissur Þorvaldsson, or respond to any trouble caused by Þorgils skarði. There only the Sturlung family themselves put their heads together, plus Hrafn Oddsson.

Ask for my advice? Not once.

When I had pulled myself together enough to talk to my wife, I told her I was glad about it. If I wasn’t consulted or asked for advice, then I wouldn’t have to back them up in whatever idiotic scheme occurred to them. Nor would I be responsible for whatever defeat lay in store.

All the same it was ridiculous and an insult. I was supposed to be some sort of local leader here in Skagafjörður, representing a guy who wasn’t even in the country and as far as anyone knew not likely to be anytime soon. And the local residents here in Skagafjörður realised it, the people I was supposed to oversee. I could sense only too well, when I came across people or found an excuse to visit them, that they were anything but convinced as to why they should listen to me. It seemed to me they were all looking at me as if they were thinking: Who does this wimp from the next county think he is, anyway? And not once did they turn to me, my own local people, to resolve disputes or settle controversies. My position was humiliating and that was why I had trouble sleeping. I was miserable. And really angry and bitter towards this Sturlung clan, who ignored me and looked down on me, after putting me in this hopeless predicament. I couldn’t even talk about it to anyone, except maybe my brother Ásgrímur – if I so much as mentioned to my dear wife Þuríður, anything the least critical of anyone in the family, she’d turn on me with a vengeance. I can’t imagine the stream of abuse she’d have poured over me if I had complained or looked to her for sympathy. No, there was nothing to do but keep silent and hope that some solution would present itself before anything serious happened.

Maybe I did occasionally mention something of this to Þuríður. Only to be met with cold and scornful silence. Cold. Something this world has more than enough of.

**Gissur**

The best move would naturally be to settle our differences, to try and wipe out the past and start anew. I think the idea first dawned on me at that long meeting Þórður kakali and I had with King Hákon and his advisers at Niðarós, in Norway. We told him of our clashes and all the contentious issues. It was early in 1247, almost three years since the battle on the bay of Húnaflói, where Þórður won a resounding victory over my ally and chief supporter Kolbeinn the Younger. Hákon was trying to make up his mind as to which of us would be a better choice to rule Iceland for him and carry out his wishes. Both Þórður and I had prepared ourselves well for this meeting with the king of Norway. We entered the hall, where Hákon sat with his retinue, at practically the same moment. Þórður was talking to several men and laughing when I entered and, since he was in such good spirits, I decided to greet him and held out my hand, saying “How are you Þórður?”

Only to see the smile stiffen on his face. Though he accepted my hand, his handshake was extremely cold and brief, reminding me of a story someone had told me earlier that winter. Hákon was supposed to have asked Þórður whether he would want a place in heaven if he knew I had moved in there ahead of him. To which Þórður was supposed to have answered that he would consider it, as long as there was plenty of distance between us. Talk about a family that never forgets an insult.
I don’t know how much truth there is in this, not that it matters. There are enough rumours going around about my dealings with the Sturlungs to drive anyone crazy who attempts to separate the truth from the lies.

But King Hákon wanted to get the facts on the table, and offered Þórður to speak first.

It gave me a bit of a shock when Þórður stepped forward and drew up a large scroll of parchment. He had prepared nothing less than a written speech, rolled up on a wooden spool, and it seemed to me both wide and long. Then he began to read. I have to admit it was a spellbinding tale he was telling, as you might expect from the Sturlungs. Not that it occurred to me for a moment that Þórður had put this together himself. Plenty of his close kinsmen knew how to wield a pen. The first one who came to mind as I listened to this account was his cousin Sturla Þórðarson, or Sturla’s brother Ólafur Þórðarson, another poet, though I hadn’t the slightest idea whether this was the case. Þórður was listing all of those among his own family and their supporters slain by my forces. Made sure he left nothing out. I killed his father. I killed four or five of his brothers, depending on how you looked at it. And the graphic descriptions of my cruelty and viciousness. Just listening to my own barbaric deeds sent shivers down my spine. Like his description of how I came across his brother Sturla, mortally wounded and lying in his own blood at Órlygsstaðir. I was supposed to have grabbed an axe off a man nearby and snarled that I would take care of this one myself. I then swung the axe up with both hands and brought it crashing down onto the head of the mortally wounded man with such force that I was lifted off the ground myself when it struck. “So that light could be seen between the ground and the soles of his feet,” if I remember his words correctly.

People in Norway were not exactly born yesterday when it comes to fighting, but the shock was clear on some of their faces as they listened.

And so the tale continued, on and on. I stole from the living and dead alike, took the homes and farms of my enemies’ widows. I was supposed to have reneged on all oaths and agreements, knew nothing but treachery, like the time I “tricked Sturla Þórðarson and Órækja, the son of Snorri Sturluson, with empty promises of peace and reconciliation, to cross the bridge over the River Hvítá in Borgarfjörður, only to take them prisoner and force them to agree to my harsh terms or be killed.” I think that was how he put it. Not to speak of how they treated Órækja; no, he wasn’t finished yet by any means, listing all the Sturlungs that I had killed or had slain. There was the very pride of the family, Snorri Sturluson himself, my former father-in-law. But when Þórður mentioned his slaying King Hákon interrupted him with a wave of his hand, saying:

“Unfortunately, I have to take the responsibility for what happened to poor Snorri.” But he gave me a look that I understood well enough. Hákon had more than once criticised me for not having let it suffice to drive Snorri out of the country and back to Norway.

When it was finally my turn, it looked to me that I had an uphill struggle ahead, if I hoped to explain my own injuries and reply to all the damning accusations heaped on me. I had no prepared speech to help me out, so I had to do the best I could. Speak my piece and try to be as convincing as possible. There was another side to the story, as is always the case. Even when it came to the most grievous complaint, that I had slain Sighvat and Sturla and his brothers, I pointed out that it was not I who struck first. I had never shown any enmity towards them or threatened them; never so much as cast an insulting remark, although I had often been urged to take action. For instance, when Sturla Sighvatsson had thrown his weight around and rode roughshod over everyone at
assemblies and the more moderate leaders were trying to get decent people to stand up and oppose his tyranny and boorishness. More than once I’d been visited by friends and even family members, some of them with tears in their eyes, to plead with me and other leaders of the Haukadal clan to support other fair-minded men. Not necessarily by force of arms, but perhaps just by putting my weight behind their demands for fair treatment and efforts to find a solution. I had always refused to take sides. Never wanted to get involved, or at the most offered to convey messages seeking reconciliation. It went on like that for years. We Haukadal men never lifted a finger against the Sturlungs, or practically anyone else outside our own district, beyond our jurisdiction, which extended from the River Þjórsá in the east to Hellisheiði in the west, and to the mountains of the central highlands.

But as I say, it was during these long and tiresome tales of misery that Þórdur and I reeled off that this thought came to me and grew to a conviction: enough is enough. Enough men have been killed. There we stood the two of us, face to face with the king. Two Icelanders who were both supposed to be among the country’s leading men, pouring out stories of misdeeds and slayings in battles which had brought us nothing but defeat. Because even the victories were short-lived. New, malicious plans for more killing and revenge and violence always sprouted like mushrooms on a manure heap. No one was safe. Of course I wanted to be the one to return to Iceland as the king’s envoy after he held this audience with Þórdur and me. But that was not how it turned out. Þórdur was commissioned and I stayed behind, and for the moment all plans for peace and reconciliation were forgotten. I did have plenty of other things to keep me occupied. I travelled through the world, journeyed all the way south to Rome with a fine entourage. Saw all those spacious and warm and fertile countries on the way, and all the people who filled the towns and the majestic buildings of the Eternal City, and the great church with a special annexe for Nordic pilgrims who had made the journey to confess their sins. All of it strengthened my conviction that it was only to the delight of the devil himself if Icelanders were continuously slaying one another instead of living at peace in our homeland. And now that Þórdur has been summoned back to Norway and I am on my way home to Iceland, that hope has been rekindled. Now I can make it happen. If God so wills. And the Norwegian bishop accompanying us aboard ship. And those Sturlungs who are still alive.

Longer sample translation available.