

FABULOUS BOOKS

Þórarinn Leifsson
Grandmother's Library

Children's Book

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Þórarinn Leifsson (b. 1966) studied at the Icelandic Academy of Arts. In the same period he worked as a street painter in Western Europe. After graduation from art school he worked as an illustrator, billboard painter and graphic designer. He has illustrated newspaper articles and several books, notably a series of Hans Christian Andersen's tales, published in four Nordic languages. His first book, *Father's Big Secret* (2007) was well received by critics and readers alike, and he received the Reykjavík Educational Council Children's Book Prize in 2009 for his second book, *Grandmother's Library*, as well as a nomination for the Nordic Children's Book Award in 2010.



TRANSLATIONS

Grandmother's Library was published in Danish in 2010 by Torgard (Bedstemor Huldas bibliotek) and has been sold to Estonia (Nynorden) and Norway (Orkana).

Father's Big Secret was published in German by Leipziger Kinderbuchverlag in 2009 (Papas Geheimnis) and in Danish in 2009 by Torgard (Fars store hemmelighed). The translation rights have also been sold to Italy (Salani).

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Children's books:

Bókasafn ömmu Huldar, 2009: Mál og menning

Leyndarmálið hans pabba, 2007: Mál og menning

Autobiographical Novel:

Götumálarinn, 2011: Mál og menning

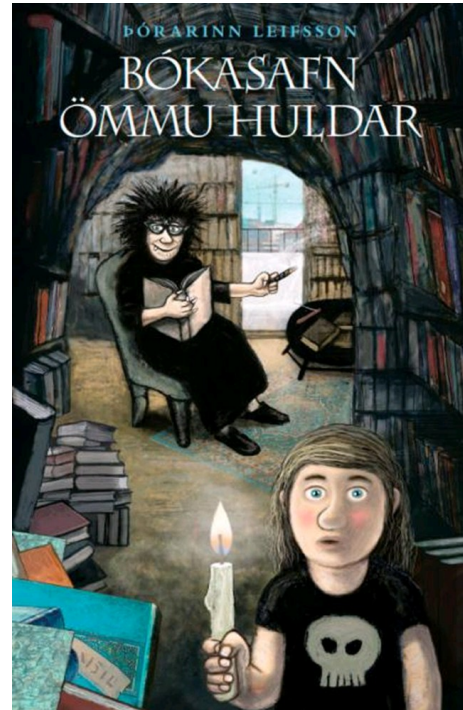
GRANDMOTHER'S LIBRARY (2009)

Albertina lives in a peculiar world. There are no books and the special educational machines in school only teach about loan interest rates. The Internet has been prohibited for years and the terrible Gold Bank has gained control of most of the world. Finally, grownups start to disappear one by one.

That's when Grandmother Huld turns up with her enormous library of books and some very dangerous knowledge. Nothing will ever be the same again.

Age group: 9+

128 pp, 34 black and white illustrations.



REVIEWS

♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ (four hearts out of six) “Þórarinn Leifsson has written yet another excellent children's book about serious matters.” **(Politiken newspaper, Denmark)**

“How do you explain the economic crisis to children? How do you explain something to them that you don't even understand yourself? How do you explain that the world-view that you've been trying to teach them was basically wrong, and now they have to retake that class, even though it wasn't them who failed it but us, their grown-up teachers?

This is a problem many parents have undoubtedly had to battle with this last year with varying results, but now we have the solution – *Grandmother's Library* by the draughtsman and writer Þórarinn Leifsson ... This is science fiction for children about the crisis, written with madcap imagination and boundless respect for children. This is no tedious polemic about the value of books for the young; it simply assumes that, if given the opportunity, children will seek out books, which are as much a necessity of life as school lunch. ...” **(Kistan.is, cultural website, Iceland)**

“To cut a long story short, this work is well conceived, complex and legible. [...] presented as a pure and clear adventure with all the requisite fables, magic and ominous, mysterious atmosphere. [...] The exiting, thrilling and humorous plot constantly surprises the reader.” **(Morgunblaðið newspaper)**

“Absolutely the best bank crisis book ever. I felt as if I had caught hold of the heavens when I chanced on such a fine, unsentimental, yet warm children's book. This is the way to do it!” **(Guðrún Eva Mínervudóttir / Winner of the Icelandic Literary Prize 2011)**



SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Silverfish College (pages 9-23)

Albertina Haraldsdóttir's first day in the new school was no picnic. In fact, she was lucky to survive it. Got away with a nose bleed, three bruises on her left arm above the elbow and a slight scratch, in addition to a sleeve being ripped off her new duffle coat.

Silverfish College certainly lived up to its reputation. It was a terribly dreary single floor grey-bricked building, enclosed by a basketball pitch and a rusty fence. The building had served as an airport depot in the olden days and behind it there was vast marshland, which some people claimed was full of ogres and monsters. No one ever dared to venture out there. Neither grownups nor children.

Albertina got lost on the way and had almost stumbled into the marshes when a grownup voice yelled after her:

- Where the hell are you going, child? Don't you know that's out of bounds?
- Cripes, Albertina thought to herself when she finally spotted the school building, they could certainly do with more signs in this town. And people could be a bit friendlier too.

She was slightly late by the time she had found the school and hadn't even finished pushing the heavy main door when she slipped, and only just about managed to stop herself from falling on her head. The floor was sticky and greasy. The whole school was filthy in fact.

Some time later, when Albertina had been at the school for some days, she was told that the cleaning lady had vanished without a trace a few weeks earlier and no-one had been hired to replace her. Albertina also noticed that a lot of the pupils had studs under their shoes to prevent them from slipping on the corridors. The substitutes that were called in to teach at the school had a rough time. They groped along by grabbing

onto the coat hooks on the walls, tripping every second step. The children could be heard tittering behind them, unable to suppress their laughter.

But, of course, Albertina knew nothing about any of this when she arrived on the scene. She was quick to find her name on the big computer screen in the hall. Screens like these had been common in airports in the olden days and this one was probably more than 150 years old.

When Albertina reached her classroom she heard a faint babble of voices coming from the flat screen inside. She decided to try to keep her coat on a bit longer, pulled her hood over her head and gently knocked on the door several times. Then she cautiously opened it.

The first thing she saw was a gangling fellow, who was probably the teacher, with a ringlet and aquiline nose slouched over a desk, one cheek resting in his cupped hand. He was fiddling with the set up menu of the old fashioned teaching machine. Suddenly looking up, he focused his bloodshot eyes on her as she approached the desk. Before she got a chance to introduce herself, he yelped like a timid poodle:

– This is Albertina Haraldsdottir. She's new in the class. I expect you all to give her a warm welcome. Absolutely. She's used to being well treated, since she lives in Golden Cage, the new building by the harbour. The one for refined rich people.

His voice was as cold as his grey feline eyes.

This man should have been anything but a teacher in life, Albertina thought to herself. If child murderer had been a recognised profession he would have undoubtedly gone for that.

The aquiline nosed man dragged himself to his feet and pointed towards an empty seat in the back row. Albertina scanned the desks under her hood as she moved between the rows. She estimated about thirty heads, but few of them looked up or showed her any interest. Very ordinary kids. The classroom itself was pretty much like most of the other classrooms she had seen. The advertising screens on all the walls beamed pictures of candy, soda drinks and new cars. When she reached the very last row, she noticed that the screen behind her was showing an ad for Golden Cage, the estate she lived on. She involuntarily pulled a face.

Her neighbour in the back row showed no sign of acknowledgement as she sat down as quietly as possible. He was a terribly feeble looking boy with gaudy white hair that pointed in all directions. Albertina felt she knew him from somewhere. But where? Heavy bags hung under the bulging eyes of his snow-white face. His mouth turned into a tiny angry little line every time he cleared his nose. She decided to keep a low profile. That freak could carry on sulking if he wanted to. She'd be better advised to concentrate on what the teacher was saying. Or... what was he saying?

The teacher muttered something incomprehensible and wearily hoisted himself to his feet at his desk, causing his chair to screech. Albertina sensed a hint of sarcasm in the way he looked at the class as he fiddled with the buttons on the teaching machine.

– Right then, children. You better have your wits about you now or you'll never survive the rat race!

He pressed a button on top of the machine. An uncomfortable screech was heard. The machine obviously hadn't been used for some time. As elsewhere, the latest trend

here was to teach with high frequency sound waves that worked on the various sectors of the children's brains to varying degrees and boosted their capacity to learn. Punishment was dealt in the form of electric shocks. This was yet another maths lesson, as so often before. Endless maths. The teacher pointed randomly at a pupil and asked:

– What's three-thousand-eight-hundred-and-fifty multiplied by eighteen-hundred-and-seven?

If the pupil didn't give the right answer, the teacher would press a small red button on the teaching machine. That released a slight electric current of 25 volts into the air, straight from a special transmitter to the pupil's head. Then the teacher asked other questions. If the answer was wrong again, the current would be increased by a further 25 volts and eventually all the way up to 150 volts, which was the absolute maximum.

The teacher very rarely questioned the same pupil more than once in the same lesson, but it could happen if he was in a poor mood or just having a bad day.

The sums were slightly easier than the ones Albertina was used to in her old school, much to her relief. Maths had never been her strongest subject. Maybe she wouldn't get quite as many headaches this winter then. She gazed around the classroom and noticed that no-one had any schoolbags any more than usual. Why had she thought that things would be any different in this school? Albertina heaved a heavy sigh. Maybe her dad was right. She should have been born a hundred years ago when schools were full of books and children were even taught to write. She shut her eyes a moment and tried to imagine herself lying in the garden at home in Soltún. She could feel the straws tickling her throat as the smell of freshly cut grass seeped into her nostrils. She had never imagined that she would miss lying there so much. By now, they had no doubt turned all that to asphalt and painted white strips for the car park.

The school bell abruptly shook her out of her day dream. The class was over. Albertina attempted to break the ice by asking the white-haired sulky puss for his name.

– Leave me alone, stupid git, spluttered the white-haired boy. I'm not a bloody social worker!

Albertina was so startled by this abrupt reaction that she was still slightly shaken when she staggered out into the corridor. She therefore forgot to watch her step and was nearly trampled on the floor when the swarm of children stampeded out of the room. She stepped right on the heel of someone who was in front of her, stumbled and managed to grab onto a coat on the clothes hook which prevented her from falling flat on her face. As she did this, something flew out of a coat and crashed on the floor with a smash. Metal tubes, bundles of wire and other junk scattered across the dirty floor. She automatically bent over it and had just grabbed the bundle of wires when a shadow loomed over her.

– Leave that alone! The white haired boy hissed. Watch out!

It was ripped out of her hand and she felt something strike her face. Then everything went black.

When Albertina came to her face felt all numb. The white-haired boy was leaning right over her. He was so concentrated on his task that his jaw drooped, revealing a row of

teeth that flashed like a shark's. This mouth hadn't seen a toothbrush for a long time and poor Albertina got a blast of his terrible breath.

She winced, almost retching.

– Steady! The white-haired boy grunted. For shit sake!

– What happened? Albertina squalled.

– Quiet, said the boy. Don't move! You've got blood and goo all over you.

He wiped her face with a wet cold cloth which he occasionally dipped under a tap of cold running water. They were in the toilets.

– Oli the moran knocked you out, said the boy. I tried warning you. Aren't you used to looking at where you're going? You trampled on Oli's heel like a demented elephant. Boom boom. The white-haired boy stood up and imitated an elephant trudging on the floor. He did it quite well, even though he was skinny and looked much more like a hyena than an elephant.

– Knocked me out? Are you joking? said Albertina, trying to sound as tough as she could, as she sat up.

– Yeah, man! He threw a studded boot at your face. I was straight behind you and didn't see it coming. Your trunk spurted blood like a waterfall! That guy likes his deeds to speak louder than his words, you might say! Coz he's fucking dumb.

The white-haired boy spoke fast and Albertina had never heard anyone curse as much. But despite the blabber, greasy white hair and the dirty bright clothes that he was wearing, Albertina got the feeling that he couldn't be all bad. She even thought she could discern a smile hovering on his lips. Or a grin at least.

– My name is Wally, he said, clearing his nose. The kids here call me Wally the virus, don't ask me why.

Albertina scrutinised the boy's helpless expression and listened to him clear his throat. She didn't have to ask him why he was nicknamed virus.

– And sorry for being nasty to you earlier, Wally added. New pupils aren't allowed to address older pupils until they're spoken to. Not on the first day at any rate. But what's a small sweet girl like you doing here anyway? Aren't you a little bit too innocent for us? Already almost killed in the first break? Ha ha! So you live on the Golden Cage estate, do you?

– Yeah ...

– What's that like?

– Just... I dunno. Awful.

The white-haired boy grinned. – Thought as much, he said.

– And it isn't true what the teacher was saying. We're not rich.

– I know that, said Wally. Of course, you're not rich. They always do that. Try to stir divisions with that kind of crap. If you think living in Golden Cage is awful, you'll hate Silverfish College even more. Welcome to hell on earth!

This was the first time that Albertina noticed that one of the sleeves on her new coat had been completely ripped off. Just hung on a few threads.

– It got torn when I dragged you into the toilets. Oli would have beaten you up. Luckily Ragnheidur, the schoolmaster, stepped in and the poor guy is in detention again. Oli isn't such a bad guy really, you know. He's just a total retard.

Albertina nodded. – What were those tubes? She asked.

– Tubes?

– The tubes and stuff that fell on the ground just before Oli laid into me.

Wally looked at her gravely, stopped washing her face, grabbed the sink and hoisted himself to his feet.

– What tubes? He grunted.

– You must have seen them. Full of rubbish.

– Listen to me, Abba. I can call you Abba, right?

Albertina nodded and he continued: – In this school, at Silverfish, kids aren't supposed to poke their noses into stuff that doesn't concern them. Oli is no choir boy, if that's what you think. Don't mess with him, okay?

Albertina muttered her assent as she carefully groped her swollen nose. She obviously needed to tread carefully in this school.

Very carefully.



Old Bodvar's burger joint

The father and daughter attracted no particular attention from the very few drivers that sped far too fast down Myrargata on that October Monday. Albertina was — despite her torn parka and the swollen nose on her round freckled face — a very ordinary looking eleven year old girl with sleek auburn hair that stretched down to her shoulders. Her unbuttoned parka revealed a glimpse of a black cotton tee-shirt with the threadbare skull and crossbones of the Golden Bank. This was the customary dress code for girls of her age. Albertina's dad, Harold Gudjonssen, was neatly dressed, as middle-aged engineers often are, although his jacket was perhaps one size too small for this weedy man with grizzled hair. At first sight, there was nothing particularly unusual about this father and daughter, except perhaps for Harold's bouncing stride and the long steps he took. The girl had a lot of trouble keeping up with him as they rushed down the footpath.

In other words, there was no indication of the great impact this girl, Albertina Haroldsdottir, was about to have on the fate of the people of this city that same autumn.

– I'm bored, Albertina said to her dad. And I don't feel like a burger, she lied, as they flounced across the street when the lights turned green. She kicked an empty soda can, which flew some metres into the air before crashing against a miserable looking naked tree beside the burger joint.

– You're often bored, Abba dear, said Harold, who was well used to his daughter's eccentricities.

They had arranged to go the burger joint on the other side of the street at the end of the day. Harold had been wanting to try out this place from the moment they had moved into this neighbourhood a few weeks ago. Now was the moment for it because Anna Stina, Albertina's mom, was working late and loathed fast food joints of this kind.

Old Bodvar' Burger Joint was a small building on the edge of the harbour. As they pushed the heavy door open, they were greeted by a warm twilight that reeked of sweaty hamburgers and stale French fries. The walls were adorned with old framed newspaper clippings, photographs of spruced up people and posters of weird men who had combed their greasy black hair back and peered mockingly over the rim of their dark sunglasses.

A fan revolved above the horseshoe-shaped counter in the middle of which there was a coffee machine and a sink and, further in, a half-open kitchen with sizzling grills.

Old Bodvar's Burger Joint had once upon a time been a lively place, but now it was as if time stood still.

An old man stood in the corner with semi-closed eyes, drying glasses with a tea towel that concealed his hands. He wore a white chef's hat on his bald head and sported a delicate goatee. He reminded Albertina of an old billy goat when he looked up and gave them a jovial nod. This had to be the old Bodvar who gave this place its name.

– Well then, Harold muttered absent-mindedly before looking up from the menu. I think I'll go for this special offer here. Number four. Burger and chips. Bodvar

nodded and looked at Albertina with an amiable smile. Waiting for her to say something.

– What'll you have, Abba? Harold asked.

– I'm not hungry, said Albertina, but then peered down at the menu again. She could barely conceal that she was slightly in awe of this place. It reminded her of the olden days she was so curious about. There was stuff to read here. Harold sighed and ordered another number four for his daughter. He knew for a fact that Albertina was incredibly interested in reading anything she could get her hands on. She could therefore easily totally lose herself in a menu and lose any interest in feeding herself.

– I realize this is all a bit strange, Abba dear, he said as they sat on a bench at a high table by the window. This is all so new. But you must be patient. We've only just moved here.

Albertina didn't hear what he said. She looked up from the menu and observed the old man who was busy wiping a table. It wasn't the rag that grabbed her attention, but the hand that held it. This was no ordinary hand; it was made of plastic, just like a dummy's in a shop window. Poor man, Albertina thought to herself, he must have lost his hand in an accident or war and has to make do with that artificial hand. Old Bodvar looked up and smiled at her. She quickly averted her gaze. There was no war raging here, she was sure of that much. But what were those constant explosions? The ones that started at night when she was going to bed. Sometimes straight after dusk. They were explosions like fireworks on New Year's eve. Except it wasn't New Year's eve. Yesterday she had dashed to the window when a sharp bang had resounded from the yard. She thought she had seen a white-haired being running around the corner. Or had she imagined it? It all felt so unreal. Like in a dream.

Albertina looked back at her dad. Knew from experience that there was no point in asking him about anything. He would just be evasive. You had to trick him, squeeze it out of him, bit by bit.

– Why do we have to live in that ghastly building? She asked. Harold stared at his daughter in bewilderment. What was she ruminating about now? – It's not everyone that gets to live in the Golden Cage, he said.

– So what?

Harold shifted uneasily on the bench. Sometimes he felt as if his daughter were from another planet. – I suppose it's because we're rich, he muttered. People envy us because we live in the Golden Cage.

– Stupid name, Albertina murmured, almost to herself. Golden Cage, Gold Bank, gold is crap.

Her father didn't answer. She continued: – Why is it better to be envied by some people that we don't know? Who should envy people who live in that dreadful building? Albertina pondered. She gazed around and realized that the place was almost completely deserted, apart from the old man, who continued to wipe the table with his plastic hand and one customer who sat on the other side of the joint, shoveling French fries into his mouth. She hadn't noticed him before. A beefy figure with a mound of curly black hair and a bow tie. Albertina shuddered and looked back at her dad. – There's nothing but weirdoes in this neighbourhood, she hissed.

– Shush, Harold whispered, keep it down.

Harold glanced around, but the mysterious man seemed to notice nothing but his French fries. There was something in his manner that made him seem more like an overgrown child than an adult. Maybe it was the way he grimaced and stared at every fry, and exaggeratedly smacked and pouted his lips, rolling his eyes. In the twilight, the French fries almost looked gilded, as if the man were eating golden chips.

Harold observed the man. All of a sudden, he seemed to be terror-stricken, as if he wanted to drop everything and make a dash for the door. But no, he couldn't do that to his daughter Abba. He turned to her and tried a more cheerful tone. – You're bound to meet lost of fun kids here, Abba. That's a top class school and not just for anyone, only for geniuses like you!

Someone must have lied to dad then, Albertina thought. Silverfish College is neither new, nor top class.

– Why can't I just continue at Waters College?, she asked.

– Waters College is too far away. We've moved into the old city centre now.

– Yeah, I know. But how come there are no other kids living on the street?

Harold shrugged. – I think it's just that people in this neighbourhood have other things to do than mass produce produce children. They want to finish paying off their houses. This is a very expensive neighbourhood.

He gazed through the dirty window, as if half expecting the cars to endorse what he was saying. To back him up.

– But what about Soli? Albertina asked.

– Soli?, said Harold. The question obviously made him uneasy.

– When is my brother Soli coming home?

– Oh, Albertina. How often do I have to say this? Solmundur Freyr went to a boarding school out in the country.

– But I just don't see how that's possible. Why didn't he say goodbye to me?

Harold shrugged.

– We didn't want to wake you up, he said. Eat up your food now, angel.

Harold bit into his hamburger and slowly chewed on it, as he contemplated his daughter. He gazed around the semi-deserted joint and wondered if Anna Stína would be coming home very late. He gave a slight start when an explosion resounded from the street. – Damn, he muttered. Why do I always let those bombs get to me?

– I want a puppy, said Albertina, who pretended not to hear his remark about the explosion. Harold sighed and cautiously placed his half eaten burger on the plate as if it were a time bomb.

– Albertina dear. How often have we talked about this? You know perfectly well that your mother is allergic...

– But she's never at home, said Albertina. And besides, I could keep him outside on the balcony in a kennel ... since I'm not allowed to have any books to read, I think...

– Books, Harold sighed, throwing up his hands in despair. What on earth would you do with books? Don't you know that reading books can drive kids insane and besides...

– Excuse me.

It was the strange man with the bow tie who had interrupted them. He had come right up to them without them noticing.

– Have you just recently moved into the Golden Cage? He asked. Unfortunately animals are banned in the block. Unless they're dead animals in freezers. Animal parts. Hamburgers. The man pondered a moment, smacked his lips and rolled his eyes. Snails maybe... and lobsters just before they're thrown alive into big pots of boiling water.

– Thanks, that's enough, said Harold. Thank you very much for the information.

– Pardon the intrusion, I totally forgot to introduce myself. My name is Howard. I handle the Golden Cage for the bank. If I'm not mistaken you moved in last week.

– Howard M. Grim? Harold seemed to recognize the name, but hardly with relish, since Albertina noticed that he was clutching the edge of the table so tightly that his fingers turned white.

– The man himself, Howard smiled indulgently. It isn't enough to just chat on screens or on the phone. Are you sure you got a copy of the contract from me?

– Yes yes, said Harold. We got the lease agreement.

Howard stared eagerly at Harold, as if he were expecting him to add something, but Harold suddenly seemed reticent and just gawked back at the man in the bow tie.

– You probably realise that you are living in a work of art, said Howard, once the silence had become almost unbearable.

– You mean the architecture? Harold asked.

– Exactly, yes.

– The Golden Cage is a work of art and all that?

– Precisely! Howard widened his eyes, rubbing the palms of his hands. A wonderful work of art! Designed by the best and most expensive architects in the market!

Howard calmed down again and seemed to acquire an almost sentimental air.

– You're good people, he said. Classy people! *Only the best — for those who invest!*

Having said this, he tottered out of the burger joint. The father and daughter watched him, dumfounded. Albertina sensed that something bad had yet to happen. That that wasn't the last they would be seeing of Howard M. Grim.

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