

FABULOUS BOOKS

Guðmundur Andri
Thorsson

The Valeyri Waltz

Short stories

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guðmundur Andri Thorsson (b. 1957) has worked as a journalist and literary critic at several newspapers and hosted a radio program at The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service for many years. He is the editor of literary journal *Tímarit Máls og menningar*.

Thorsson's first novel, *Mín káta angist* (My Merry Despair), was published in 1988 to critical acclaim. He received the DV Cultural Prize for Literature for his novel *Íslenski draumurinn* (The Icelandic Dream) in 1991. The book was also nominated for The Icelandic Literature Prize in the same year.

The novel *Íslandsförin* (The Journey to Iceland) was nominated for The Icelandic Literary Prize in 1996. In 2003, Thorsson published his novel *Náðarkraftur* (The Power of Mercy) and in 2008 *Segðu mömmu að mér líði vel* (Tell Mama I'm Fine).



TRANSLATIONS

Íslandsförin (The Journey to Iceland) was published in German by Klett-Cotta in 2000 (Reise nach Island).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Short stories:

Valeyriarvalsinn, 2011: JPV

Novels:

Segðu mömmu að mér líði vel, 2008: JPV

Náðarkraftur, 2003: Mál og menning

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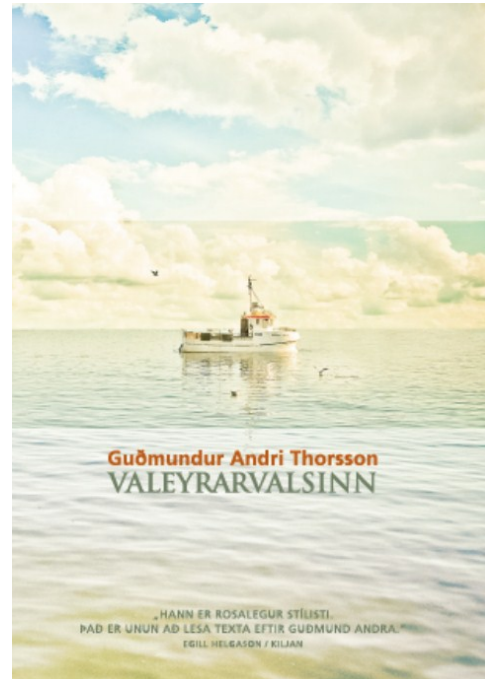
Mín káta angist, 1988: Mál og menning

THE VALEYRI WALTZ (2011)

In a small Icelandic village, the paths of peoples' lives are variously interwoven, and though many are intimately familiar with one another, no-one knows what lies hidden in the next person's head, deep within the memory palaces of the mind.

In sixteen closely-linked stories, all of which take place during the same two minutes, Thorsson presents people of flesh and blood, familiar folk who battle with life and an existence which is at times grey and cruel, at times incomparably wonderful. In chiseled and beautiful prose, characters and sentiments spring to life, resulting in an entertaining and lively short story cycle where the great is reflected in the small, the whole of Iceland in a little village.

168 pp



REVIEWS

“... [The author] captures the imagination, simply fires up the senses. *The Valeyri Waltz* is a delightful read from cover to cover.” (Morgunblaðið newspaper)

“... Here is a writer who loves his subject, the daily bustle of simple, everyday people unoccupied with great undertakings, children of God whom the author treats with understanding and warmth while still showing and explaining their flaws, allowing us to understand these villagers who are our brothers and sisters.” (Fréttatíminn newspaper)

“It is the author’s warmth and fondness towards his characters – even the hapless ones – that characterize this book ... *The Valeyri Waltz* is, above all, a very human story about individuals and the community they create.” (Víðsjá, Icelandic National Broadcasting Service)

***** (five stars out of five) “An exquisite story, fragrant with sunshine and salt and human longing.” (Fréttablaðið newspaper)

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

(www.sagenhaftes-island.is)

“I am a advocate of small literary forms, and the short story cycle is a particularly fascinating one,” says Guðmundur Andri Thorsson of his critically praised new book, *Valeyrarvalsinn* (lit. *The Valeyri Waltz*). The work offers sixteen discrete glimpses into the lives of residents of the fictional town Valeyri – all taking place within the same two minutes.

The book's cover describes it as a short story cycle – a collection of stories that together form a larger, interlinking whole.

“The idea is that each story should be able to stand on its own as a traditional short story, but can simultaneously be seen as part of the larger picture,” Guðmundur Andri says. **“The stories reference each other in various ways: One story gets a brand-new ending later in the book; a character makes a phone call, and in a later story we hear the particulars of the call. One story ends with a fly zipping out of a window, but another one starts with a fly coming in through a window. Taken as a whole, these stories are all part of one overarching narrative: the story of the village of Valeyri, of which the reader should be able to piece together a mental image.”**

Guðmundur Andri cites Sherwood Anderson's seminal 1919 short story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio* as his favourite example of the form. **“A friend of mine gave me that book years ago, telling me I should translate it, it would be right up my alley. I was noncommittal at the time. But maybe *The Waltz of Valeyri* is that translation, after all!”**

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

It comes off the sea ... (pages 5-7)

It comes off the sea and slides along the spit. As the day recedes the fog creeps up the fjord as it ever does in the summer, it noses around the hillocks, looks behind knolls, glides into the village, where it licks the corners of the houses before lifting itself upwards just enough for me to be able to peep through windows.

I see the secrets, I see the people cooking and pottering about, pissing, being silent, skulking. Some are crying, some are listening, some are staring. I see the people screaming into their pillows, throwing out rubbish and useless memories, and I do not look away. I never look away.

Jósa is alone, she sips lukewarm beer from a can as she scans in her old class photos to put them on Facebook. Kalli is relaxing in the barn, he's been struggling with yet another washing machine. Anna and Jói are not on speaking terms today. Doctor Jónas sits, head drooped, Lalli Puffin has gone for a walk and is about to bump into his sister Lára whom he has not spoken to for years and years . . . Here is Sveinsína scratching herself between the shoulder-blades with a wooden spoon, she is going to pop over to Jósa to celebrate, but by then I will have vanished with the fog. Before long I will have vanished with the grey fog.

We creep on past the corner of a house. The fog goes before me as if it is supposed to be somewhere else by now and is fed up with my loitering, yet we linger by the little red house with the grey roof where Ása's children's colds are getting better and little Una has at last stopped crying. All the secrets in a small village – they are admittedly not important, not all at any rate and not always, but the fog and I are nevertheless here, peeping through windows like an inquisitive biune God who cannot stop reassuring himself that daily life continues and takes its course, even though He has bestowed free will unto Man. It comes off the sea and slides along the spit. Chill accompanies it and it is welcomed by nobody. Smyrill the Poet nonetheless feels inspiration come upon him as we approach, gets up from his toils and takes out his shabby brown notebook, strolls into the kitchen and gazes out of the window into the blue yonder and scribbles down a few ideas for his cycle of poems *Aroma of Ashes*. The fog is the blue yonder which suddenly embraces you. It is pliant adversity. It is the law of nature itself. It comes off the sea and slides along the spit, and the people here feel it is everything that is grey, the cold silence which at times creeps in over the life here just as it has now draped Svarri, the mountain that overlooks the village. And then it is evening. And then it is night. And in the night comes the rain.

Love awakens, flowers die, people give up halfway up the hill, headlights disappear into the blackness of the evening, a candle flickers in the breeze from a window, moments remain in the mind but days pass on. Months pass on, weeks, feelings and years. I see the blue in the sky in April and the green in the grass in May. I see the beat of wings as the south draws near; hear a new resonance in the swish of the grass. I see the red in the children's cheeks in spring when they have been out playing all day. I see the autumn weathers in the

closed expressions of peoples' faces. I sense the smell of winter as the fog steps from the sea in late autumn and death spreads over the land. Petrol pumps stand alone in wintry snowdrifts . . . The silence of the village during white, dark days . . . The silence of the mountain . . . The bleakness between the houses . . . I have seen love awaken in eyes and die in deeds. I have seen an abandoned child cease crying. I have seen men drown and boys hang themselves. I have seen a pregnant woman murdered and buried.

I am long since dead. I should have been extinguished long ago, and perhaps have been and simply have not realised it yet. I am just an awareness. I come in off the sea and slide along the spit and soon I will have vanished with the fog. I am the afternoon breeze and I visit folk around half past four in the afternoon and then blow away somewhere an hour later to my dwelling which is in that what is the past; it is in the grass that stirred a few minutes ago, it is in the seeds of the dandelion clock that float to a new place, it is in the folds of Kata's dress as she cycles down Strandgata on her way to the Village Hall.

The Valeyri Waltz (pages 115-119)

Last night when the sun had set and the wind had abated and the eider had tucked their beaks under their wings while a lone seagull soared towards its cliff and the timeless waves burbled on seaweed and stones and seals yawned peacefully on outer skerries and the people slept and there was no-one about except him and the sheep and a few mice and perhaps a woman out on a farm who couldn't sleep, Smyrill the Poet sensed how vast is poetry, how open the world and how immeasurably broad and high his own mind soared. He sensed within himself the restless creation, the sky and the earth, the wind and the sun – the grace of it. He sensed how, in the vaults of his mind, flickers of light came alive flashing between eternities. He sat on a rock and watched with closed eyes the pictures gliding through the vision of his mind. All kinds of people he had never seen and would never see: a blonde woman in a violet dress with earrings like apricots, her short hair tucked behind her ears, a girl with a clip in her hair and a sulky expression, who seemed to be waiting for a lollipop; a boy in a blue sweater, a cross-eyed man in a striped dressing gown with a comb-over . . . people that didn't mean anything to him slipped into his consciousness almost carelessly and he didn't know where they came from, whether they existed, whether they had existed, and he let them slip away unattended to their own dimension and focused his senses back to the night, the sky, sea, rippling grasses, swish of the breeze and birds. He heard a resonance. He sat on a rock and watched the sandpipers run around the seashore like words dropped by God. His mind was immeasurable and for everything that existed at this moment there was a response in the expanse of things, he could perceive all that was happening, in his mind everything became a line of verse; the glide of the seagull became a sonnet, the pit-pat of the ringed plover a quick free verse, the rippling of grass falling dactyls, the maroon sky a hexameter. He heard a resonance. When the sun had set and the wind had abated Smyrill the Poet heard and sensed that the poem was on its way to call on him, it came from the sea and slid along the spit, it was his most beautiful poem. It was about the

shoots, the buds and the joy. It was about all that must be. It was about the low ebb on the shore which he felt drew nearer with the poem; it was about the gliding of the birds, the grasses of the earth and the gurgling of the waves, it was about the shape of the conch-shells and God's living sleep. It was about the spirit that keeps vigil in the waves of the sea and makes the sand-hopper jump, the bird soar and the bluebell droop. It was about the women who had touched him, soft and gentle with hands that cared for him and lips that opened him up and breasts that kept him warm during cold nights. It was about Unnur. It was about the power of grace. He heard a resonance. He worked quickly to write all the flow of his thoughts into his little brown book, sensing and hearing that the poem was about to come to him, it was his most beautiful poem – it would come flying to him on its wings. He was both excited and calm, like an old hunter who knows that things can go either way but senses that now is a good time to hunt. He sat on a rock and watched the sentences run swiftly around the shoreline, busy finding their place, trying to settle into the right structure in their right molecules in order for a poem to emerge. He scribbled quickly. The words flowed from his pen, forming pictures which did not look like the words they referred to, and yet they were. He wrote 'straw', he wrote 'sea' and he wrote 'shore'. As he wrote these words he created straw by a sea, on a shore. He wrote 'hands' and 'mine' and 'open'. He wrote 'bird'. He drew a bird. He watched the seagull glide about in sonnet arches, the waves heavy with the thousand-year schemes of the ocean currents, clouds that on the deep blue sky suggested white yearning. He watched the wind, watched the straws in the wind, saw the wind in the straws. He put the pen down for a minute while he waited for the poem to come to him in its right form with the right words in the right structure. He began again to write, fast and indistinct, the words creeping forward like flightless birds tied to the book. He wrote 'her hair' and 'in mountain cave alone' and 'in woods I watched at dead of night'. He wrote 'Unnur'. He wrote 'thou' and 'from the south' and 'breathe' and then he wrote 'straw' and 'shore' and 'blue' and 'lands'. He wrote 'be thou'. He sat for a long time and continued to write and look inside himself at people that floated within, promising nothing, at the sea and the sky and at his own sense of loss. He thought about what had happened to him during his time, some of it beautiful, some ugly. He thought about the people with whom he had made, then lost, contact with during his time – the tender women, the good friends. He wrote 'straw' and 'shore' and 'sea' and these words described everything he had lost. The sea was deep, the shore was deserted, the straw stood out. The sea was loss, the shore was loneliness, the straw was pain. The sea was cold, the shore was rocky, the straw was fixed. The sea was here and there, the shore was here but not there, the straw would not be here and never there. He heard a resonance. The low ebb passed.

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He stands in the kitchen at his writing desk, lifts his pen and waits. In front of him he has a folder with his poetry cycle *Aroma of Ashes* and he wants to add to it a poem he can read later at the meeting. He would like to read something new, and he waits for the poem. When it arrives, it will recognise itself. He has everything here. His books that cover every wall, including the basement. His

old harmonium he used to compose at when he was still doing that sort of thing, including *The Valeyri Waltz*, which continues to bring him royalties. The postcards he collects. The stones he brings back from the shore. His paints. All his past shadows. He has long since turned into a barnacle in this place, as he says when people ask him why he doesn't move to the south. Here he has his own life – and Unnur's too, even though she passed away long ago. And the poem will recognise itself when it comes fluttering on to this white sheet of paper.

He lifts his pen expectantly, sips the cold coffee and looks up from the white sheet, wrinkles his forehead, strokes his beard. He looks out of the window at Kata Choir gliding past on her bike, her forehead wrinkled, deep in concentration. He smiles and picks up his pen to scribble into the notebook lying next to the white sheet of his manuscript. He writes 'sea', 'shore', 'straw'. The poem fluttered away into the coming dawn, it abandoned him. It disappeared into the lands of limpid blue. He knew it had wings, sails, time, directions and tone. All goes. And tonight when the sun has set and the wind abated and the eider have tucked their beaks under their wings while a lone seagull soars towards its cliff like a sonnet, Smyrill the Poet returns to the shore, sits on a stone with pen and notebook and waits patiently for his poem. Then he hears a resonance. It is the song of the stars that resounds along the pathways of worlds.

RIGHTS

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