



FABULOUS BOOKS

Guðrún Eva

Mínervudóttir

Everything With a Kiss Awakens

Novel

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guðrún Eva Mínervudóttir (b. 1976) has earned herself a place among Iceland's most promising writers.

Guðrún Eva's first book, *Sóley sólufegri*, came out in 1998 in a very limited edition. In the same year her short story collection *While He Watches You, You are the Virgin Mary* (Á meðan hann horfir á þig ertu María mey), came out to much critical acclaim. Since then Guðrún Eva has published a number of novels, a collection of philosophical stories for children published by The National Centre for Educational Materials and a book of poetry.



AWARDS AND NOMINATIONS

Her novel *A Lecture on Happiness* (Fyrirlestur um hamingjuna) was nominated for The Icelandic Literature Prize in 2000, and the novel *The Story of the Pianos That Drifted Ashore* (Sagan af sjóreknu píanóunum) was nominated for the DV Cultural Prize for Literature in 2002. Guðrún Eva received the latter prize for her novel *Yosoy* in 2005.

Guðrún Eva received The Icelandic Literary Prize 2011 for *All is Awakened with a Kiss*.

TRANSLATIONS

Translation rights to *Everything With a Kiss Awakens* have been sold to Germany (btb).

Translation rights to *Yosoy* have been sold to Italy (Scritturapura, 2007) and Denmark (Art People).

Translation rights to *The Creator* (Skaparinn) have been sold to Italy (Scritturapura), Germany (Random House / btb), UK (Portobello), Finland (Atena) and France (Autrement).

BIBLIOGRAPHY (SELECTION)

Novels:

Allt með kossi vekur, 2011: JPV

Skaparinn, 2008: JPV

Yosoy, 2005: Mál og menning

Sagan af sjóreknu píanóunum, 2002: Bjartur

Albúm, 2002: Bjartur

Fyrirlestur um hamingjuna, 2000: Bjartur

Ljúli ljúli, 1999: Bjartur

EVERYTHING WITH A KISS AWAKENS (2011)

The year is 2003, and the capital of Reykjavík is enveloped in a cloud of ash due to the continuous eruption of mount Katla. Indi is caught in a web of her own lies, severely addicted to cleaning and shopping and downright losing her struggle with everyday life. Rescue comes in the unlikely form of Indi's old school friend, the charismatic but unstable Elisabet. Not everything goes according to plan, however, and rays of hope are banished by a cloud of plagues and horrors, accompanied by the destructive forces of erupting mount Katla.

Thirteen years later events are being carefully unearthed by Elisabet's son, David. Through documents and drawings, hearsay and his mothers' dubious recounts he learns the disturbing truth about the fate of Indi, while getting to know the banality of evil and the meaning of genuine, heroic sacrifice.

Did Elisabet have a destructive effect on everybody around her? Did the Katla eruption perhaps bring out the evil in people? Did the one true kiss possess some undefined terrible power?

Everything With a Kiss Awakens is a powerful and imaginative story in the same vein as Minervudottir's previous stories, where the narrative dances on the boundaries of reality and fantasy. Illustrations are by Sunna Sigurdardottir.

299 pp.



REVIEWS

“This slips into your mind and sits there. That is the hallmark of good books – you do not forget them in a hurry.” **(Kiljan National TV)**

“Mínervudóttir has long since proved herself to be one of our most fertile and original writers, with a unique way of presenting people's interactions in a fresh and unexpected light.” **(Fréttablaðið Newspaper)**

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Book one

It is best to introduce myself

I'm going to put on record a story which you might find implausible, or maybe you won't. It's not about me, or only in so far as it deals with my need to get to grips with the truth and the lies about the events which took place thirteen years ago, in the winter of 2003 when the Katla eruptions were at their peak. I was eighteen then, confused and angry.

At the time I tried to get to the bottom of what had happened but in the end I gave up and decided, contrary to my instincts, that none of this had anything to do with me. I kept my curiosity at bay and got on with my life.

Then on a dull and wet autumn evening last year, much like the one outside the windows this evening, I got a call which broke my pact with the world.

Is that Davíð? Davíð Elísabetarson? an elderly woman's voice enquired.

Yes, it is, I replied.

Hello, my dear, this is María, Þorlákur's mother.

I didn't catch on straightaway - her voice had altered; it sounded older and feebler than I remembered. Besides, I hadn't met her often as she lived in Akureyri and neither mum nor Þorlákur were keen on driving long distances. The last time we met was at Þorlákur's funeral, but we didn't actually talk, I just hugged her and she patted me on the shoulder, her face stiff with suppressed grief.

Hello there, I said.

I'm just calling because I'm moving into sheltered accommodation.

Yes, well that's... Are you pleased about that? I asked, embarrassed about the idea of growing old. About death.

You have to be, don't you? she replied. Well, my niece has been helping me pack up and I was rather wondering about Þorlákur's things. I can't take them with me to the grave. But I can't bear to throw them away and you were almost like a son to him...

Yes, I replied.

Shall I just send them on to you? Are you still at Fornhagi 20?

Yes, well, many thanks. By the way, what sort of stuff is it?

Mainly drawings, some of them are rather good. It's up to you what you do with it all. But it occurred to me you might just want to keep them.

She'd guessed right. I used to enjoy Þorlákur's stories. I was also fond of him even I used to resent him for letting mum push him around. He came on the scene when I was twelve and couldn't do enough for me. Except stand up to mum, which he didn't dare do, any more than anyone else.

I don't really need to mention that Elísabet's not my natural mother. Mum adopted me in

Argentina and we traipsed from one country to the next before she decided to settle here in Iceland. I was nine years old, had just touched down at Reykjavik international airport when I first heard Icelandic spoken by anyone other than my mother. It was certainly a shock, but you could say my childhood was a series of shocks.

I'm not very tall and I'm dark enough for people to remark that I'm not "a true Icelander" as I've been told often enough over the years. Still, it's never been a big deal for me. Teasing has never bothered me and I've never been eager to win popularity. After we moved here, I concentrated on making up for the time I'd missed at school and to a great extent my life revolved around trying to get a decent night's sleep – which wasn't always easy. In Elísabet's world the partying never really stopped.

Fortunately, my wife, Védís, likes peace and quiet. She works in a bank and in her spare time she likes knitting, reading and listening to music. Our two daughters, Ingibjörg and Sólveig, have inherited their mother's quiet temperament, or maybe they are just well-balanced because we've taken good care of them.

As a social worker I can make use of my experience. I go into homes where there are problems and try to act as mediator, offer the family members a framework for how to relate to one another and to care for their children. On top of that I have a part-time job in a centre for youngsters who've had a difficult upbringing and have problems at school. So my working day is fairly long. I am indeed "a true Icelander" in so far as I find it normal to do little other than work.

About a week after the phone call from Akureyri I received a parcel in the post. It was a large banana box, with the Chicquita label stamped front and back, and was carefully tied up with fine string. I left it lying in the car boot for a few days. It wasn't until Sunday morning when we'd finished drinking coffee and reading the papers that I thought about it again. The girls were playing in their room, Védís was curled up on the sofa with a book and I had nothing particular to do.

I tidied up in the kitchen and wiped down the table before I heaved the box onto it and began to empty the contents: drawings, newspaper cuttings, photos of me and mum, Katla erupting and the devastating grey ash covering the east of the country, outlines for cartoon stories and loose sheets of paper with Þorlákur's dense writing.

I thumbed through his things for some time before I remembered my papers and documents which I'd brought to Fornhagi but hardly looked at since. They were probably in a similar sort of box in the garage. I spent over an hour searching for them amongst all the clutter only to discover they weren't in a box but in plastic bags scattered around the garage.

I took the bags into the kitchen and began sorting them out in order to feel I'd got a grip on it all. Jón's notebooks were there, blue exercise books – five in all; along with Indi's diary where she'd jotted down her cleaning jobs in ink. This last find was the most intriguing of the whole collection, because Indi had written in pencil in the spaces

between the cleaning jobs, page after page of personal accounts which I first thought were her childhood memories. But I hadn't read very far when I realised this had nothing to do with growing up in the Icelandic countryside but touched on a totally different reality – and a much more alien one. When I first found the book (in the glove compartment of Indi's car on the evening she died) I couldn't stop reading it. There is something rather disturbing and at the same time entrancing about these accounts, which are not quite fantasy or fiction, nor are they connected to Indi's youth, although it might look that way at first glance.

The bags also revealed pictures which mum had given me in her day: of herself, of Þorlákur, Jón and Indi. And newspaper cuttings about the eruption of Katla which lasted for twenty five months, from the end of November 2001 to the beginning of 2004, and left its mark on everything back then. Now I find it amazing how quickly we got used to the ash. Some days you were wiping grit from the corners of your eyes, coughing it off your chest and crunching it between your teeth. The haze shrouded the sky but society continued to revolve around politics and the economy with a good dose of personal triumph and tragedy thrown in. People died and babies were born.

Sólveig, my younger daughter, wandered into the kitchen and looked wide-eyed at the pile of yellowing papers on the kitchen table. What are you doing, Dad? she asked, pushing her dark fringe to one side with little restless fingers. Dark-haired and brown-eyed like me, but her skin is fairer.

I'm looking back on things that happened in the old days, before you were born, I replied and scooped her onto my lap. I showed her some of Þorlákur's harmless drawings and again I felt that same surprise I had after I became a dad, at how Elísabet could neglect me in the way that she did.

Here are Adam and Eve, I said.

They're naked! squealed Sólveig pointing at Adam's willy.

Here's King Bluebeard, you must be careful of guys like him when you are older and this is Elísabet, your granny, I said and passed her a picture of Elísabet and Indi holding wine glasses and laughing at the camera.

Is she dead? she asked.

No, darling, I replied.

Is this granny? she asked, pointing at Indi.

No, but she's called Ingibjörg, like your sister.

Is Ingibjörg called after her, like I'm called after granny Sólveig?

Yes, darling, I replied quite truthfully. I named my firstborn after a woman I hardly knew. I thought it was the least I could do since mum was the indirect cause of her death.

Of course I didn't know exactly the course of events which lead to Indi's death but it formed a dividing line in mum's life. Shortly after Indi died, mum and Þorlákur split up and a few years later he died of a heart complaint.

Indi is the heroine of the story because despite being at the mercy of materialism, she showed both courage and personal integrity

My mother told me about the day she and Indi met up again and she swore she remembered their conversation word for word. And there's no way of knowing for certain that she lied – other than about the bits directly concerning me. She definitely embroidered the story where I make an appearance, probably her way of trying to flatter me.

And then I'll fill in the gaps with odd bits I know about Indi: that she was prone to tears, had a weakness for new clothes and spent most of her so-called "spare" time cleaning other people's houses.

It was early spring in Reykjavík, green shoots pushing their way up through the soil and mild winds whipping up litter in the squares and gardens. People began to take a chance and leave scarves and hats at home, children took to their bikes, kicked footballs around and got their feet wet on the yellowish brown pitch which still had some life left in it. Some wore face masks, even though the air pollution was below danger level and no ash was falling on the capital.

Indi was tidying up the broom cupboard in a detached house on Seltjarnes when the phone rang. She looked out from the huge windows which she had just scrubbed clean of sea-spray and saw the sun shining on the rain soaked earth, on the asphalt path skirting the shore, dogs and their owners, joggers in gleaming Nikes and on children playing ball. The water heaved beyond the sea-wall. The sound of waves lapping and the ebb and flow of children's voices reached in to the freshly cleaned house.

Indi tried to bring some order to the brooms but when they refused to stand upright she banged the cupboard door shut and ignoring the clatter of handles, she whipped her phone out of her bag.

Hello, she answered hurriedly.

Indi? Ingibjörg Sigrún? queried a woman's voice.

Yes, said Indi. She'd been christened Ingibjörg Sigrún and nicknamed Inga Didda until her baby sister began to talk and Inga Didda came out as In-di.

Hi it's Elísabet here, said the voice.

Indi didn't know what to say. She hadn't seen or heard from Elísabet in twenty years. They'd been inseparable in high school but fell out soon after they left and hadn't spoken since.

Elísabet responded to Indi's silence with her familiar laughter. Of course you're surprised!

she said. I'd have been surprised if you'd rung me. It's just that you've been on my mind the last few days and I suddenly had this longing to meet up or at least to hear from you. I hope you're not cross.

No, said Indi. I mean ...

Are you at home? asked Elísabet. You're down as living in Tjarnabol in the phone book. That's on the estate over in Seltjarnes, isn't it? I know this is rather sudden but I'm in the area and not doing anything in particular so I just ...

No, replied Indi. I'm not at home but I can meet you in the car park by the lighthouse in a few minutes.

She shoved the envelope with her wages into her bag along with her phone and pulled on her grey woollen coat with its patterned lining; green flowers, leaves and stalks delicately threaded across the white fabric, the soft coat enfolded and soothed her and gave her a luxurious sense of security.

She went out by the back door, through the garden and across the field where children were playing and out onto the footpath. She found pleasure breathing in the spring air which the weather forecasters said was polluted with invisible particles of volcanic ash but to Indi it was simply the fragrance of sea and earth.

She lived in the block nearby and as she drove past Indi kept her eyes out for Jón's car, a white Subaru estate but it was nowhere to be seen. Jón probably hadn't got back from school yet. She accelerated, her mind full of her old friendship with Elísabet.

As eighteen year olds they'd had grand ideas for their future. Indi was going to be a journalist who specialised in scaring the government with the power of her pen into making them do what the people wanted and so she would change the course of history. Elísabet was going to be a sculptor and her works would all be the size of Christ the Redeemer overlooking Rio.

Elísabet was on Indi's radar even before they got to know one another, when she thought Elísabet was unbearably loud and attention-seeking. On one occasion she witnessed Elísabet spit at the Danish teacher who'd told her to keep her mouth shut for once. As a result Elísabet was expelled from school but she turned up again a week later as though nothing had happened and no one knew how she got the authorities to take her back.

At the start of their last year at school Indi put herself forward for the school magazine's editorial team but she nearly withdrew when she found out that Elísabet had the same idea.

They argued over the most trivial matter in the editorial team meetings and Indi kept thinking that Elísabet made out she disagreed purely for the sake of an argument. The other students on the team would roll their eyes when they started but Indi sensed that the group respected her for daring to stand up to Elísabet.

Then one day Indi was on her own in the office eating a prawn sandwich and drinking a bottle of fizzy malt when Indi came storming in with the proofs for the next edition and screamed: This story shouldn't be there!

Indi swallowed, put down her sandwich and got to her feet before she responded: Since when shouldn't it be there?

Since yesterday. We were talking about it, don't you remember? It's so unbelievably crappy it makes me want to puke.

We weren't talking about dropping it, said Indi. *You* were talking about it. Nobody agreed with you, and anyway it's a perfectly good story.

Oh, go screw yourself, said Elísabet.

Maybe it was because she said it so dramatically or maybe it was because Indi was both a vicar's daughter and a country girl that she took the words somewhat literally. For a moment she forgot herself and, bottle still in hand, she started gyrating her hips in a screwing motion, anger distorting her face. Her thick red skirt swung awkwardly and malt soda splashed across her tight black angora jumper.

Elísabet burst into howls of laughter and Indi couldn't help laughing too. Which is how they became friends. And for about two years they were so close that there really wasn't any room for anyone else in their lives.

After their relationship broke down Indi made new friends but she didn't foster these bonds and they gradually withered. Now Indi didn't have time for anything other than casual contact with her old school-friends and workmates. Friendly messages via the internet, or at most the odd invitation over for a meal.

Indi sped into the car park by the lighthouse, slammed the car door and strode with a false self-confidence across the tarmac towards Elísabet who came towards her with open arms. Elísabet was wearing a long black coat and had that same aura about her which, in the old days, had either attracted her schoolmates or sparked their anger. She took Indi by the shoulders, shook her and exclaimed loudly. She was as endearingly wild as ever, it seemed. They walked down to the shore, the seagulls' squawks competing with the waves. Further down the spit of land, near the golf course, a large white dog with a black head was barking. They saw him snuffling in the sand and trying to prance in all directions at once from the sheer joy of being outside in the open air under such clear blue sky. The heels on Indi's new shoes sank into the sand and rotting seaweed with every step.

As they walked they exchanged pleasantries and small-talk about their age and how time flies: Us two, turning forty! Who would have thought it?

They laughed and Indi remembered how Elísabet's laughter, exuberant and unstoppable, had sometimes filled her with a vague dread.

Where were you when Katla began erupting? asked Indi.

I was in the bath, replied Elísabet. My son broke his usual sullen silence to shout at me to come straightaway. When I came into the room he was sitting in front of the television. The newsmen were naturally very agitated and the drama was so overwhelming that we weren't sure whether it was for real or an ambitious t.v. drama.

Your son? Indi repeated.

Elísabet nodded: He's called Davíð. I adopted him as a one year old when I was twenty two. I was living in Argentina then and married to a liquor vendor who was absolutely delighted when I walked out taking the boy with me. We didn't even sort out the divorce. Davíð is eighteen now, he's just moved out and won't speak to me. He says I'm suffocatingly narcissistic. Which of course is right.

Hearing the tale, Indi felt unaccountably filled with melancholy and gazed towards the horizon where the blue of sea and sky met.

They settled down on their favourite boulders as they used to and Indi asked: What about your dream career? Did you become a sculptor?

Elísabet shook her head so her mousy brown hair flopped over her forehead. That's too lonely a job for me. Well, to be honest I dropped the sculpture thing half way through because I couldn't stand the dreary and awkward teaching methods and I felt called to become a teacher myself. And in between I landed up drifting around doing this and that. Such as setting up a little business in Amsterdam watering indoor plants for other companies and such like. I spent five years staggering around empty offices with a watering can. Talk of isolating work, she said and laughed. But like I said, I'm now working full time at the Icelandic Academy of the Arts. And I'm also a tour guide in the summer. I take foreign tourists on short trips.

Then she studied Indi with such eager curiosity that Indi became embarrassed: And you?

I studied Icelandic at university and then got a job at the National Centre for Educational Materials, replied Indi.

Do you have any children?

No.

A husband?

Yes, his name's Jón.

Elísabet looked at her with an intensity that reminded her of Elísabet as a youngster. Of the intoxicating ambition they'd once shared as friends. Elísabet was always sparked by something. It was a flame that burned so brightly that it scorched your eyebrows if you risked getting too close.

We've been together for eleven years and got married seven years ago, said Indi and hesitated before adding: He's certainly not perfect, a bit of a rough diamond really. But I love him.

As she talked she drew a line in the sand with her heel and when she looked up she saw Elísabet's eyes filled with tears.

And you? asked Indi. Do you have ...?

Yes, replied Elísabet. His name's Þorlákur. We met five years ago and moved in together straightaway. He's writes comics.

Þorlákur Jóhannsson? exclaimed Indi. I know exactly who he is. His books have sold all over the world, haven't they? So is he ... I mean, are you ...?

Laughing, Elísabet dried her eyes. Yes.

Indi nodded, suddenly feeling more confident next to Elísabet.

Jón teaches Icelandic and literature at the high school in Hamrahlíð, Indi volunteered. Strange, I never thought of it before – that Jón's school is where you and I met. She took a deep breath: Elísabet, I want to apologise for what happened between us. I was just so angry during those years after Dad died and ...

What nonsense! Elísabet interrupted her. It was my fault for taking offence and charging off to New York just because you wouldn't come with me to some tattoo shop, remember? It was nothing you said or did, I just wanted to show I didn't give a damn about anything and made any excuse to go over the top. Which is how I've lived my whole life. I don't regret anything but I feel as if I've done it all, three times over.

She went quiet and looked out over the sea.

Indi was cold already. She felt the cold in the rock she was sitting on and in the sea breeze. She raised her hand to blow on her fingers. Do you mean nothing bothers you anymore? she asked.

Elísabet looked past Indi before she answered slowly: Not at all, I get upset by everything under the sun. But most of all by that young, stubborn, broad-shouldered apple-of-my-eye Davíð.

Well, naturally, said Indi feeling embarrassed without knowing why. A seagull with a red mark on its beak appeared out of the blue and nearly clipped their heads with the tip of its dark wing.

Translation: Sarah Bowen

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EHRENGAST 2011