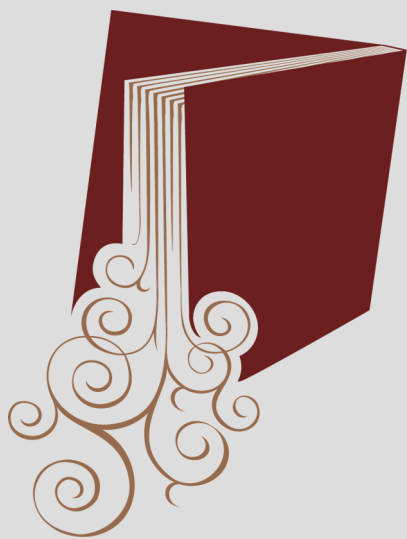




FABULOUS BOOKS

Haukur Ingvarsson

November 1976

Novel

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Haukur Ingvarsson (b. 1979) is a literary scholar, poet and radio personality.

His first book, in 2004, was *Niðurfall og þættir af hinum dularfulla Manga* (*Downfall and Episodes of the Mysterious Manga*), where short poems alternate with longer texts.

In 2009 he published *Andlitsdrættir samtíðarinnar* (*Contemporary Features*), an examination of Halldór Laxness' late novels which considers their reception history and inventive experiments with the art-form.

November 1976 is his first novel.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Novel:

November 1976, 2011: Mál og menning

Poetry:

Niðurfall og þættir af hinum dularfulla Manga, 2004: Mál og menning

Non fiction:

Andlitsdrættir samtíðarinnar: Síðustu skáldsögur Halldórs Laxness, 2009: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag

NOVEMBER 1976 (2011)

November 1976 tells the story of personal conflict in a block of flats in Reykjavík, 36 years ago. The reader comes into contact with the inhabitants of three flats: Dórothea and Ríkharður, who live with their only son Þóroddur; the independent divorcée Bíbí; and Baldur, the resident fix-it man.

As Dórothea gets ready to watch the evening news on the Friday of November 12, 1976, the television bursts into flames, prompting a violent outburst from her husband: “You’ve killed the TV, woman.” In 70’s-era Iceland, a TV is about as easily acquired as a nuclear warhead, so Ríkharður grudgingly decides to seek the help of Baldur downstairs.

Baldur makes no promises, but borrows Þóroddur, Dórothea’s and Ríkharður’s teenage son, for a dubious work trip to the US army military base in nearby Keflavík. Baldur, it turns out, is a smuggler, and the little “business trip” proves fateful for the whole stairwell.

The stairwell becomes a microcosmos of Icelandic society during the late 1970’s, paving the way for a multi-layered story of violence and power set in a recent past. Recent and yet so remarkably long ago.



REVIEWS

“... a delightfully entertaining and extremely well written text which ... fills the reader with optimism that the author will be writing many good books in the future.”

(Fréttablaðið newspaper)

“The plot is crisply shaped, the humour never far below the surface, and the narrative disciplined. The prose is highly visual, as best exemplified at the end of the story, where the narrator “zooms out” of the apartment block’s narrow setting into the wide universe at a crucial moment in world history. The fact that Icelanders, in their provincial way, did in fact miss this moment, provides a priceless final highlight to the work’s conclusion, concerning a nation at the dawn of the television age.”

(Vísjón, cultural radio programme, National Broadcasting Service)

“The style reminds me a bit of Guðbergur Bergsson in its precise, almost scientific descriptions of totally mundane doings and conversations which, as a result, become almost surreal. ... this first novel by Haukur Ingvarsson is really interesting.”

(Hugras.is, web magazine of the School of Humanities, University of Iceland)

SAMPLE TRANSLATION (chapters 1&2)

I

The Old Set

In the days leading up to the first formal television transmission of the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service on September 30th, 1966, there was a strange sense of urgency in Reykjavík. You could see long-faced men driving home from work and women strutting through the streets, fists clenched deep in their coat pockets. A certain disturbance had interfered with the inhabitants' good spirits and the explanation for this was simple enough in itself, but complex in the wider context. In a nutshell, electronics stores could not meet the demand for television sets and so, many were afraid to only catch by hearsay that which others would see. The lack of appliances, however, had been brought about by the currency restrictions which had been implemented to meet the foreign trade deficit, which again could be traced to the financial problems of the fishing industry, and it cannot be said often enough that the root of that problem was the impudence of the fish in the sea, who follow the currents of the oceans rather than the highs and lows in the lives of men and women on land. If word got out about new television sets in some store or other, people would dash over with their glove compartments stuffed full of bank notes, and if you got there before all had been sold, the transaction would be swiftly conducted, more often than not on the doorstep, since the spiffed-up sales assistants had discovered it was better to have people fight over the sets out in the street than inside the store, surrounded by merchandise. After the first broadcast was over, the frenzy abated, since most people had gotten hold of a television one way or another. As the years went by, the television waves spread further across the country and the frenzy was repeated in the various communities until such was the situation, ten years later, that only 450 farms in Iceland did not get the National Broadcasting Service's transmissions. The spread of television resulted in a great outflux of currency, which made many Icelandic politicians hostile towards this appliance which was in continuous development with all its improvements and innovations, therefore causing even more wastage of currency.

If you want to get a sense of the changes this appliance has made to people's way of life, it is enough to take up position in front of a block of flats on a winter's night such as this, when the snow is falling from the dark blue sky, and watch the spectacle that takes place as it grows dark and the inhabitants turn on their lights. One living room is filled with a soft, reddish light; you can see books, paintings on the walls and wooden furniture; the nearest living room is strangely lit up like a fish tank and in there you can see tropical plants and modern-looking green wallpaper, the shadow of a dancing person flutters behind a white curtain and next to a conical table lamp in a small cubbyhole, a man sits scratching his head with a pencil, perhaps solving a crossword puzzle or playing correspondence chess. But now the lights in many flats go out at the same time because it is almost eight o'clock, the news is about to begin and the television sets come alive to cast a pale, blue moonlight tinge on the snow and the person standing outside looking in.

A woman crouches in front of a television set, carefully peruses the knobs like chocolates in a box, finally choosing one she likes the look of and pressing it; lo and behold: the screen is in flames but does not burn. The room is filled with a brass light so

the woman is blinded. She closes her eyes, opens them, flutters her eyelids, regains her vision but all that is left on the screen is a pale blue circle which slowly fades until it dies out.

From inside the flat there comes a racket: "What's going on?" A toilet is quickly flushed and then the man comes rushing into the living room, all angry and holier-than-thou with a newspaper under his arm.

"I pressed the knob to watch the news and a light came on, then darkness, then a blue circle, and then nothing happened and the news just isn't coming on."

"Let me!"

The man waves the woman away, throws up his hands in annoyance and goes down on his knees in front of the television. He strokes it gently, puts his ear up to the speaker and listens. Slowly pushes the knob. Nothing happens. He turns up the sound, fiddles with the controls and wets the tip of his forefinger on his tongue, then rubs the knob. The blue circle appears on the screen again. He slowly increases his speed, working it quickly until the knob is going in and out. For a while it looks as if he'll be able to revive it. From inside the box there's a cough, then a buzzing reminiscent of rattling breath, more buzzing and then more buzzing and then no buzzing and nothing.

Nothing.

The man sighs and strokes the television all over with his flat palm as the heat from the lamp fades away.

It's all over.

He gets up and sniffs the air, smelling sweat: "You might have helped your mother turn on the set, boy! They don't have a clue about these things." He addresses the boy even though he can't see him. He can sense him fluttering around the apartment.

The woman is standing in the middle of the floor; she is wearing a flowery lavender dress made of an electrified synthetic fabric, and has a white apron tied around her waist. She is perfectly tidy, but first and foremost she looks worn-out and weary. Her hands hang limply down by her sides. Veins in various hues of blue and red traverse the arms. She comes to some sort of a realisation, a look comes over her limp face and she raises her hands, opens the fists in front of her eyes and carefully examines her palms. "What have I done?" she whispers. The man stops looking angry and holier-than-thou. Maybe he's suddenly remembered he didn't wash his hands. "What have I done?" she repeats, her voice shaking.

On the wall behind her there is an embroidered picture of a fairytale maiden spinning a thread. She has yellow hair, her dress is red with sky blue decorations, around her waist she wears a belt of gold and around the head a hairband like a hippie. Into the picture, these words have been stitched: "Long hair and rosy cheeks."

"You've killed the TV, woman, that's how it is. There'll be no watching the programmes tonight."

She recovers. She decides not to cry after all. Her face doesn't fall. She doesn't collapse. She begins a speech of defense: "We might be able to find something to do other than watch television."

"I suppose we can amuse ourselves by staring out the window." He walks over to a

window, sticks a finger between the curtains and peers out. Acts as if he's falling over laughing and slaps his thigh. Then he quickly turns to the woman, stony-faced, and screams: "Well, isn't that something." He rushes towards her, comes to an abrupt halt and stretches out his chin, breathing rapidly and loudly through his nose which is touching her temple. His arms point back like tail feathers.

It's not as if the heavens open, but the woman starts to cry without changing her expression. The tears cascade down her cheeks. First her head sinks down to her chest, then the shoulders arch over the head. It's as if she wants to crawl into herself but can't get any further: "Why don't you just hit me?" The man stops breathing through his nose and suddenly she can feel the hot breath from his mouth on her cheek. This was how he used to breathe when they were young. Now he first breathes loudly through his nose, then warmly through the mouth. She goes to reach out for him but then he retreats, as if unable to take any more of this. She rallies a bit before quietly walking into the kitchen to stand by the sink. Looks out. Does the dishes. Women and snails can never escape their homes, no matter how they crawl.

She lights up, inhales, exhales, ashes into the sink.

Time passes.

The air grows heavier and greyer.

Normally the three of them would sit in front of the box, the boy and the man in a two seater sofa underneath the embroidered picture of the blond maiden by the spinning wheel. The woman on a stool close by. She would smoke in the dark, rock in her seat and sip coffee which was often both stale and cold. She would smack her lips as she drank, blow at the coffee and hold the mug with both hands: "Well, well." Sometimes she seemed to need physical closeness. Then she would get up and stand there, quiet and stooping. She would look at the picture above the sofa, thrust her shoulders upwards and squint as if peering at something small. She never cleared her throat but sometimes she would get coughing fits and hunch up like a man being punched in the gut. In the end, they would make room for her, pressing tightly against the arms of the sofa so that she could reverse into the space between them, like a loaded lorry pushing its broad behind into a narrow space. Her warm body would slowly meld into theirs: "Well, well." Thus night after night would pass, the men upright on the sofa, arms folded across their chests, with her bunched up between them. When it was only the two of them on the sofa they never sat close to each other.

The woman stands by the sink blowing puffy clouds. The boy watches from the doorway as the orange glow moves from one cigarette to the next. In the bedroom, the man undresses with profound sighs, puts on light blue pyjamas with dark blue stitching on the collar and sleeves, and gets into bed with the paper. He seems to have trouble concentrating on his reading, finally turning off the lamp with a lot of fuss. He tosses and turns every which way and then says under his voice: "I suppose there's nothing doing but to speak with that bastard Batti tomorrow. There's no relying on you two deadbeats for entertainment." The boy shuffles his feet. There is a rustling and without turning around, the woman asks: "Are you there, Þóroddur, dear?"

He looks around and wonders whether he's there or not.

II

On the Stairs

Þóroddur can't stick it out in the flat. When he opens the door into the hallway he is greeted by cooler air; yet there's some damned tang in it, something fermented. He slips out. His socks stick to the rough carpet and without having made a conscious decision he sneaks around as quietly as he can. There is music coming from the second floor from the top, which might indicate Bibí is having a few drinks. He follows the sound up the stairs and can hear her joining in: "*Sara, Sara. So easy to look at, so hard to define.*" Her voice is strangely deep and offbeat, as if it's being played off a record at half speed. He puts his ear up to the door and realises Bibí is whirling around the apartment. Her feet are making thumps and they are definite and regular which he takes to indicate she's dancing. Occasionally he can also discern lighter steps but isn't sure whether she's staggering or dancing with someone. The song comes to an end and she catches her breath with loud sighs. Then the next song takes over: "*Your breath is sweet. Your eyes are like two jewels in the sky.*" The racket and the thumps from the apartment begin again but when they approach the door, Þóroddur hurries along to the next landing. Just as he's tearing his ear away he can hear Bibí shout out: "And then after this we'll do *Sara* once more."

Out through the window on the landing he can see big snowflakes fluttering about in a dense whirl; they are lit up by a lamp post on the pavement. There's a seagull sitting on the lamp post and Þóroddur thinks to himself that the gull must be cold. He also wonders whether the snow will collect on the seagull's head and back, and, if so, whether the seagull gives off enough heat to melt the snow that lands on him. He can remember reading in a book that seagulls fly inland when a storm is gathering, but finds it unlikely that a snowfall would count as a storm, even if it's dense. What is a seagull doing in the middle of the city at this time of year? Þóroddur raises himself up on the balls of his feet where he stands, spreads his legs a bit, lets his knees sink, hunches his shoulders and waves his palms slowly alongside his loins: "You won't be bringing me any more bad news, you vulture," he mutters hoarsely through clenched teeth. He doesn't waver from his position but very slowly pretends to draw a gun with his left hand, the right hand ready to cock the hammer. He squints and finally pops a few shots at the seagull, which is unimpressed and still loiters on the lamp post despite the flurry. After this, the boy feels silly and has the feeling somebody is watching him; still he pretends to holster the imaginary pistol before looking around.

Þóroddur can see no-one in the dark hallway, but out on the street two cars are meeting. One is heading towards the house and that one slows down but doesn't stop, so the other has no option but to give way, move sideways into a snowdrift and come to a complete halt. Þóroddur recognises Batti's red Skoda which appears heavy at the wheel, old tyre marks leading its way zigzag along the road. One moment the Skoda is washing the stationary car in light, but the next it's over by the curb on the other side, its wheels spinning forcefully until it's stuck. When Batti steps out of the car, the other driver has gotten out. He takes off a mitten and sticks out his hand, and Batti does the same. Once they've greeted each other, Batti gesticulates behind his car. The man follows his gesture and starts pushing. At equally spaced intervals, the car emits a cloud of smoke and the man is splattered with snow from underneath the tyres. The man motions for Batti to pause, then walks over to him and knocks on the window. They seem to be having a

discussion. Finally, Batti makes some gestures at the other car and the man looks across, then back at Batti. Again, Batti points with his hand in the same direction and this time the man walks over there, wading into the drift in order to get to the door on the passenger side. He opens it and, after some discussion, helps a woman wearing a coat get out of the car. They walk hand in hand through the drift, across the street and behind the Skoda, then they both thrust themselves up to it and push. The woman makes all the difference and soon the Skoda is moving. Free to go, Batti waves out through the window and then rolls it up. The man slowly waves back but Þóroddur can see no reaction from the woman. Around the time when Batti drives into the parking lot outside the block of flats, the people have gotten into their car. The lights come on, smoke comes out of the exhaust, the wheels turn, but they're stuck.

Þóroddur pricks his ears and notices Bob Dylan has stopped singing about Sara in the third floor apartment; down on the ground floor Batti is struggling to open the front door but after a tussle, the wind can be heard howling as it slips through the doorway. Batti stamps the snow off his feet so that the stairwell echoes, then carefully dusts himself off before latching the door to the wall and going back out into the car which he's left running. Þóroddur looks down at Batti's gleaming bald head; he leans comfortably back while walking, softly rocking his shoulders forwards one at a time, but kicking his feet out without the hips budging. Þóroddur moves his lips and whispers: "You imperious dog." Batti gets back into the car and reverses as close up to the door as he can get, turns off the engine and goes behind the car. Þóroddur has to get up on tiptoe and press his forehead up to the cool glass in order to see what's going on. Batti sticks the key into the lock on the boot but before opening he looks cautiously around, casting his eyes over each row of windows, one after the other. Þóroddur jumps and retreats behind the curtains. He lays low until he can hear Batti putting something down in the hall, then he dares peep down again. The boot is open and inside there are stacks of beer cans. Þóroddur gasps but before he can grasp the extent of the goods he hears someone saying his name.

"Þóroddur, are you there?"

He looks over the railing and down to the third floor, and can see light seeping into the hallway from inside their flat.

"It's just me pottering about down here, Dóróthea," Batti calls up through the stairwell.

"Oh, right," his mother replies, but instead of going back into the flat she goes out into the hallway, quietly shutting the door behind her. She sneaks the same way Þóroddur has just taken, and just like him she puts an ear up to Bíbí's door to listen. But she doesn't stop there, she straightens up and adjusts her dress before knocking on the door with considerable authority. It surprises Þóroddur that his mother dares to pay Bíbí a visit. His father has nursed a dislike for her since the day she set foot through the door, but the final straw came during Advent last year, when his mother stayed behind after a house meeting and drank an excessive amount of mulled wine, in the opinion of his father who as a result forbade all contact with this woman, whom he never calls by her right name, only the French Film Whore, the Woman of Babylon or something of the sort.

It's not long until the door is opened wide. Bíbí is standing in the doorway wearing a pair of white knickers but otherwise naked; she raises her eyebrows when she sees the woman but doesn't seem taken aback by her arrival. Dóróthea, on the other hand, is

obviously flustered; she retreats but immediately takes a step forward so that Þóroddur can see nothing of the naked woman apart from her head. He gets down on his knees and crawls on his stomach further onto the landing, as far as he dares, so that he can look past his mother. A slender ankle is revealed, a long leg and a breast partly hidden by locks which have come undone from the lazily arranged hair. Bíbí leans back into the doorframe and her body disappears from Þóroddur's sight again, and immediately he feels as if it was never anything more than an illusion. Bíbí has a beautiful face but on top of her natural features she has drawn the face of another woman; there are lines around the eyes and the mouth, and the eyelids are coloured blue, the cheeks red. Þóroddur feels as if there are two women standing in the doorway, the naked woman and the one painted on her face.

"Beg pardon for the inconvenience, it's just that something came up, round ours. I really wanted to see someone." Bíbí folds her arms across her chest but otherwise doesn't move. The fully dressed woman gradually begins to crawl into herself.

"Well, have you seen enough?"

Þóroddur swallows. Bíbí laughs.

"Come inside, I just finished my exercises but I can't be bothered to get all dolled up since it's only you."

The door shuts and Þóroddur is alone on the landing again. He gets up and dusts himself off, then whispers out into the darkness: "And God created woman." He thinks the words sound silly and his voice comes out completely different from what he had imagined. He's also absolutely certain someone's watching him, and he hurries down the stairs. Just as he slips into the flat he can hear Batti's voice: "Where are you coming from, young man?"

Þóroddur pretends not to have heard anything and shuts the door behind him.

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