

FABULOUS BOOKS

Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir
Through the Glass Wall

Young Adult Fiction

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, writer and illustrator (b. 1953), is well known and popular for her children's books and young adult fiction. She has published fifteen books, starting with the award-winning *Ljósin lifna* (The Lights Come Alive) in 1985. Ragnheiður has also re-written and illustrated Icelandic folk tales for children, and published a collection of Icelandic songs for children.



AWARDS AND NOMINATIONS

Ragnheiður's books have received numerous prizes, including the Icelandic Children's Book Award in 2000 for *Leikur á borði* (The Gambit). She was awarded the Reykjavík Scholastic Prize in 2001 for *40 vikur* (40 Weeks) and again in 2004 for *Sverðberinn* (The Sword Bearer). Ragnheiður received the Nordic Children's Book Award for the same book in 2005. In 2009, she received the Icelandic Illustration Award and the Icelandic IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) Award in 2011. *Through the Glass Wall* was nominated for The Icelandic Literary Prize for Women's Fiction in 2011.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND PUBLICATIONS ABROAD (SELECTION)

Young adult fiction and children's books:

Sverðberinn (Mál og menning, 2004)

Sold to:

Denmark: Sværbæreren (Sesam, 2005)

Norway: Sværbæreren (N.W. Damm og Søn, 2006)

The Faroe Islands: Svørðberin (BFL, 2007)

Leikur á borði (Mál og menning, 2000)

Sold to:

Sweden: Allt på ett bräde (Bläckfiskserien, 2002)

Thailand: (Image Publishing, 2003)

The Faroe Islands: Leikur í talvi (BFL, 2006)

Lithuania: Proga laimeti (Gimtasis Zodis, 2007)

Gegnum Glervegginn (Veröld, 2011)

Hjartsláttur (Mál og menning, 2009)

40 vikur (Mál og menning, 2001)

THROUGH THE GLASS WALL (2011)

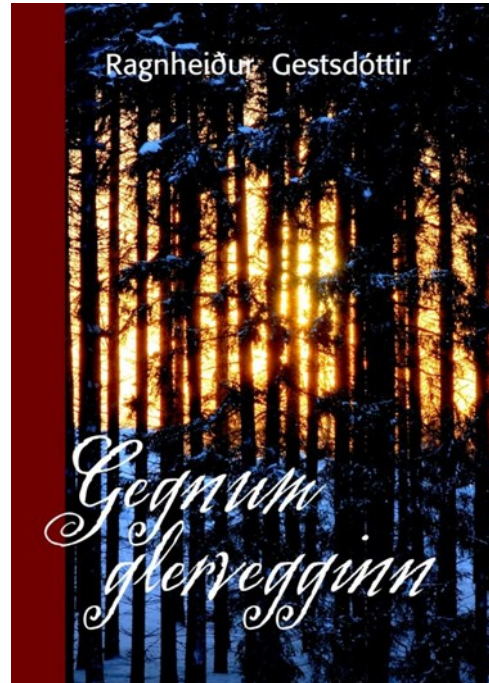
Through the Glass Wall tells the story of thirteen year old Princess Aurora, who lives alone in a glass dome that holds a tiny world of its own. All of Aurora's needs are fulfilled in her confined existence, except that of human contact. Aurora's isolation is broken, however, when Dusk, a boy of her own age, comes into the dome, setting her world on its head. Having caught the glimpse of the world outside, she decides to flee with Dusk out of the glass dome and into the unknown.

During the journey, Aurora learns more and more about the world; the joy of friendship as well as the hard life of the common people and the merciless tyranny they live under. She decides to face her own parents, the King and the Queen, as she cannot accept that, despite knowing the plight of the common people, they still choose to live in luxury.

Through the Glass Wall is an exciting story touching on serious subjects like the conservation of nature and wealth inequality.

Age group: 11+

270 pp



REVIEWS

“...one of the very best children's books in a long time ... Ragnheiður manages to keep things entertaining – no mean feat when writing about such heady issues as inequality and injustice.” (**Morgunblaðið newspaper**)

“One of the most interesting children's books this year is *Through the Glass Wall* by Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir ... interesting, fascinating, and succeeds splendidly in provoking thought.” (**www.literature.is**)

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Chapter one:

THE GLASS DOME

It is night-time in the dense, dark forest of the North, and the forest animals still hide in their shelters. The long-legged elks will not stir before the first light of morning and the shaggy, grey wolves huddle close together under the low pine branches. A hare in snow-white winter fur is awoken by the gnawing pains of hunger in his belly. His pink snout and whiskers quiver as he sniffs the air for signs of danger before setting out to seek food, but the cold is still too bitter and the darkness too heavy, so he settles down to wait for morning.

In a clearing in the woods the little log cabins are built in a tight circle, as if they are huddling close together for warmth and shelter from the icy winds. In between the houses a bonfire burns brightly. Beside it stands a tall man dressed in a long fur coat, armed with a long pointed stick. He makes his rounds regularly behind the little group of dwellings and peers into the darkness of the forest that encircles them, then returns to the fire to warm himself. Soon dawn will break and his night's vigil will be over.

The dark woods stretch in all directions, seemingly endless and impenetrable. A few thin columns of smoke reach for the sky that is now turning a grayish pink with the first light of morning. They mark the places for other little villages hidden in the forest. But out by the horizon a strange glow is visible. It is not the light of the pale winter sun, now peeking over the tops of the mountains in the east. This light shines from some source on the ground, from something that is hidden between the tall, dark-green pines.

Coming closer, a strange sight meets the eye. A space has been cleared in the forest, and there a large dome of glass rises from the ground, lit up from the inside with a warm glow. The thick, whitish glass is opaque, so the inside of the dome is not visible. When a curious bird tries to fly closer to try to explore this strange thing, his fragile little body is shaken as he hits what appears to be an invisible wall round the dome. He shakes his feathers and gives an angry squeak, then flies up onto the sturdy branch of a nearby pine to investigate from a safe distance. There are other birds perched on this branch and on the trees all around, and on the ground a multitude of small forest animals have gathered to stare into the strange, pale glow.

The birds and animals that stare at the dome in fascination cannot see through the thick glass with their sharp little eyes. The girl inside the dome, who is just now awakening from her deep slumber, cannot see through the glass to the outside. She knows nothing of the animals outside, the tall, dark trees or the bitter cold. Inside the glass dome it is comfortably warm and comfortably bright. She stretches and yawns, rubs the sleep from her eyes, draws aside the light, white bed-curtains, and steps on to the soft, white fur in front of her bed. She pulls her long, white nightgown over her head and drops it on the floor by the bed. Bare-footed and naked, she walks a few steps across a tiled floor to a small pool. She walks down a couple of steps and then lets herself slide lazily into the warm, crystal-clear water. The length of the pool can be covered in a few swim-strokes, and at the further end of it a pearly little waterfall cascades down a stone wall. The girl swims slowly across and leans her head back to let the warm water flow over her face and her long, golden-red hair.

Around the pool and along the walls of the dome there is varied and lush vegetation. Close to the bank, tall blue irises and pale-green ferns cover the ground. Behind them there are rhododendrons with huge white and cerise-colored flowers, and along the glass wall a few small fruit-trees, blossoming in pale pink. The wall behind the waterfall is made of carved stone, with narrow ledges covered with moss and ferns. On one of the ledges a tiny bird perches on his little nest, keeping the eggs warm. Colorful butterflies flutter about the pink cherry-blossoms and the white blooms of the apple-tree. In here, a warm and gentle Spring reigns, in spite of the bitter cold outside that bites at the birds and animals huddling outside, hypnotized by the white glow from the glass dome.

The girl swims back to the steps and climbs out of the pool. A soft, white towel lies folded on a bench by the bank. She dries herself off and drops the towel onto the tiled floor. Then she takes the carefully folded white underwear and the white dress that also lie on the bench, and dresses herself. The dress is simply cut and is similar to the nightgown that she threw off before her bath, except that it has long sleeves and is buttoned down the front with little pearly buttons. The girl reaches out for the hairbrush that lies on the bench and brushes through her long, wet hair. It doesn't matter if the dress gets wet on the shoulders and back, it dries quickly in the pleasant warmth inside the dome.

The girl yawns and throws the hairbrush back in the direction of the bench, but misses, so it rolls to the edge of the pool. She doesn't bother to pick it up, but walks bare-footed off the tiled floor and onto an area covered with lush, green grass. Spring-green vegetation surrounds this little lawn, and in the center of it stands a circular table under a silver metallic gazebo covered with evergreen climbers. There is only one chair at this table, which is covered with small silver bowls full of all kinds of food; fresh bread, fruit and berries, nuts, eggs, sliced fish and meat. The table also holds a tall pitcher full of water and another full of juice as well as sparkling crystal glasses. The girl sits down at the table, pours herself a glass of water and drinks it down. Then she reaches for a soft bread-roll and bites off one bite, makes a face and puts it down. She eats a handful of nuts and takes a few bites from a glowing red apple, but puts that down half-eaten as well. When she stands up to leave the table a sharp sound is suddenly heard, a sort of shrill whistle, and then a voice:

- Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. It is necessary to eat from all food groups to get proper nourishment.

The voice is metallic and chilly, a little nasal. A large screen silently slides down from above and lights up with a picture of a woman standing beside a table covered with various foodstuffs. The girl frowns and sits down by the table again.

- Yes, yes, she sighs. - I know, I know.

She eats one egg, a sliver of white meat and a tiny morsel of fish, drinks a glass of juice and picks at a few strawberries. Meanwhile, the woman on the screen reels off the attributes of each food-group, stopping only when the girl has eaten a tiny amount out of each of the silver bowls. Then the picture turns off and the screen slides silently up and out of sight.

The girl sighs, rises slowly and stretches her arms up above her head. Then she walks off the green lawn and onto another area, covered by a thick, rubbery mat. As soon as she steps onto the mat, loud and cheery music streams out of unseen loudspeakers high up in the dome, and another screen slides down into sight. This time, a man appears, energetic and cheerful, broad-shouldered and athletic. He gives her a bright greeting:

- Good morning, Aurora! Let's greet this lovely day with a smile and start the

blood circulating by some energetic movement!

The girl answers with a scowl and sticks her tongue out at the image on the screen. For a long time she thought that her trainer could see her, just as she could see him. She used to smile and greet him back, she was even a little fond of him, as he seemed to care so much about her health and well-being. But one day she had not been in any mood for jumping and stretching, and had answered him sullenly and scowled at him. She'd regretted this immediately, and expected him to be angry or hurt, but her manner seemed not to have the slightest influence on the man on the screen. Then she'd started to experiment. She made faces and put her tongue out, even made all sorts of rude noises, but it had no influence whatsoever on the muscular and smiling trainer. The only thing that mattered was whether she moved or not. If she stood still or did something other than he demanded, everything started again, right from the cheerful greeting and the irritatingly bright and bouncy music. She knows that it's best just to the exercises right away to get off the rubber mat as soon as possible. After that comes her favorite time of the day.

Her heart beats a little faster after the exercise. She hurries to use the little outhouse that is tucked between some evergreen bushes. After that she puts on her apron and gloves and starts to care for her plants and her animals.

The work is not hard. There is no difficult weeding to be done or heavy burdens to carry. But the plants and animals are never quite the same from one day to the next. They are the only things that change in her daily life. She loves to see how the flowers grow and bloom, to smell them, to pick away wilted flowers and leaves and to see the new buds grow and open. She watches the butterflies crawl from their cocoons and spread their multi-colored wings. A few little birds live in here, and she sees them build their nests and lay on the eggs, watches as they feed their growing young and follows their first feeble attempts to fly. Once she found a tiny little bird lying motionless on the ground. She made a bed for it out of soft leaves and rose petals. The next morning, it was gone.

Aurora works slowly and carefully, waters the flowers, trees and bushes and tidies around the plants with a small rake. Part of the vegetation is like a tiny forest with some small rowans, little birch-trees and a miniature maple with huge, reddish leaves. The undergrowth is lush with ferns and in between them is the burrow of the two white rabbits. They are tame and come to her when she holds out her hand, sniffing to check whether she's bringing them something good to eat. She strokes their soft fur and scratches behind their ears. There should be some babies soon. No doubt there will be two of them, like always.

The blossoms of some of the rhododendrons are beginning to fade, and Aurora knows that it is better to pick the wilted ones away. She fills a small basket with faded pink and white petals and goes behind the tallest trees. There is a small latch in the floor there, that she pulls open. A sharp smell of rotting leaves and earth fills her nose as she empties the basket into a dark, deep hole in the ground. She is close to the outer wall of the dome here, so close that she can feel the strange cold that seems to radiate from it. She doesn't like the white, opaque glass-wall and tries not to look at it or think about it.

When Aurora has finished caring for the plants and animals, it is time to eat again. She picks at the food in the silver bowls, and is careful to sample everything to avoid another lecture. It doesn't seem to matter how much she eats, she just needs to take something out of each bowl. She is in no hurry, because after the meal the most tedious time of day will follow. When she has eaten she walks very slowly across the lawn, crosses by the big, white-curtained bedstead that stands in the center of the dome, and over to the

area dedicated to her daily education and upbringing. Aurora walks down two steps to a sunken, circular area. There she sits down cross-legged on a pillow and immediately another screen comes down from the darkness above. This one is the biggest of them all.

The screen lights up with a golden glow and the air fills with soft music. Then a wonderful, tall and white palace, surrounded by lush greenery, appears. Outside the palace, crystal-clear water shoots up from silver pipes and falls down like a rain of pearls into a fountain of white marble. White peacocks spread their tails and strut across a soft, green lawn. Two people, dressed in white, tall and blond, come walking down the steps of the palace, a man and a woman. They come closer and closer, until their faces fill the huge screen:

- Good day, Aurora! Good day to you, beloved daughter!

Aurora doesn't answer. She doesn't even look up at the screen, but stares straight ahead with clenched teeth, waiting for the daily greeting to be over. When she was little, she used to greet them back, to smile and wave at her parents, believing them to be watching her from their beautiful palace, just as she was watching them. But she has known for a long time that they are only images on a screen. The greetings are never quite the same two days in a row; some days her parents sit inside the palace in rooms of gold and marble, sometimes they walk in the park, but in a few weeks or months the same images will appear again. This is the way it has been as long as she can remember.

The greetings only take a few moments and Aurora is relieved when they are over. Long lessons follow, lessons in mathematics, history, grammar and music, and endless instructions on correct behavior and manners. Various teachers appear on the screen and explain the subjects. She finds most of this tedious, but none of it makes her feel bad except the images of her parents in their white palace. They appear again at the end of the lessons to thank her for paying attention to her teachers and to assure her that all that she has learned will come to good use in the future. Then they wish her a good night's rest and the screen goes blank.

The light in the dome is dimming. Aurora stands up and stretches. She is tired; tired of sitting still and listening, tired of the droning voices of the teachers as they pour out facts for her to learn, tired of trying to understand. But most of all she is tired of being closed inside the dome. She knows that there is a bigger world outside of her little world. The images on the screen show her parent's palace and the shining city that surrounds it, populated by smiling people, dressed in white. The pictures show vast green fields and trees that are much bigger than the ones in her garden. She has learned that there are birds and animals that she has never seen, tall mountains, rivers, endless oceans. She has seen the pictures on the screen and she knows the names of these things and what they are, but still it seems as if they aren't real.

She's always been here, at least as long as she can remember. But she hasn't always been alone. She closes her eyes and tries to recall Nanny's face. It is becoming more and more difficult to remember what she looked like, it's been so long since she disappeared. But she remembers her voice, so warm and sweet, remembers how she used to sing for her and tell her stories. Nanny took care of her when she was little and taught her to take care of herself. Then, suddenly, she was gone. One morning, when Aurora woke up, she was alone. And that's how it has been ever since. For a long, long time ...

Aurora eats the last meal of the day. This time she only eats some fruit and nuts and the screen makes no comment. Then she washes and brushes her teeth like Nanny thought her to do, a long, long time ago. She undresses, takes the clean, carefully folded nightgown from the bench by her bed, and puts it on. At last she lies down on her bed

and stares up into the white canopy above. What would it be like, she wonders, to look up into a starry sky, like she has seen on the screen? The little table by the bed holds a silver cup with water. She drinks it down in one long sip. Soon she is unable to keep her eyes open. Princess Aurora sleeps.

SELECTED WORK

The Sword Bearer (2004)

Signý is a sixteen year old girl living in Reykjavik with her parents, who feel that she neglects her studies and spends too much time on role-playing games with her friends. Their worries are perhaps heightened by the fact that Signý's older brother Grímur has started taking drugs, and seems lost to the family. Signý finds warmth and security within her circle of friends, and an outlet for her creativity in the mythical worlds they make up and populate with dwarfs, elves, trolls and other fantastical beings. Signý has been creating a new character to play and gives her the name Leda.

One evening, when the group has been playing, they decide to go out for pizza. Signý sits in the backseat beside Hlynur, a boy her own age. They are just discovering that their feelings for each other are developing into something beyond friendship. The weather has suddenly turned cold and an invisible film of ice coats the asphalt. The young driver loses control of the car and it crashes into a concrete wall. All the passengers are injured and Signý loses consciousness. After the accident, Leda – the sword bearer – wakes up in an unknown world with a difficult and dangerous mission to carry out. Meanwhile Signý is in a deep sleep at the hospital and no-one knows if she'll ever wake up again.

The Sword Bearer is a thrilling adventure in which fantasy and reality are ingeniously interwoven.

An English translation of the book is available.

Age group: 11+

230 pp.

REVIEWS

The story's undertones are somewhat reminiscent of tales such as H.C. Andersen's "Ice Queen", nor is it a million miles removed from *The Lord of the Rings*. There's also a sprinkle of Astrid Lindgren-like fantasy. All these elements form an excellent whole, and a finely crafted story..." (www.literature.is)

... There is no doubt that Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir has created a work of art that is full of life, questions and references. I can only repeat what a lot of kids must say when they put this book down: Oh, I can't wait to see the movie!" (**DV newspaper**)



RIGHTS

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