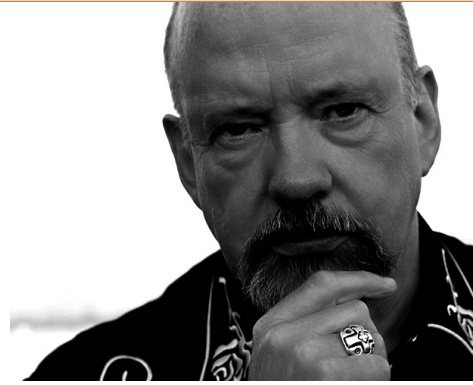




SAGENHAFTE BÜCHER

Ólafur Gunnarsson
The Winter Journey



BIOGRAPHY

Ólafur Gunnarsson was born in Reykjavík on July 18, 1948. He completed a commercial diploma from The Commercial College of Iceland in 1968. Ólafur worked for merchant Ásbjörn Ólafsson hf. from 1965-1971 and was a driver of the Reykjavík medical emergency from 1972-1978. He is married to Elsa Benjamínsdóttir, has two sons and lives in the Reykjavík suburb Mosfellsbær. Ólafur has worked as a writer since 1974.

Poetry by Ólafur Gunnarsson had appeared in newspapers and magazines before his first novel, *Milljón-prósent menn* (One Million-Percent Men), was published in 1978. He has published novels, short stories and children's books. His novel, *Tröllakirkja* (Troll's Cathedral, 1996) was nominated for the Icelandic Literature Award in 1992 and the English translation was furthermore nominated for the IMPAC Dublin Literature Award in 1997. An adaptation for the stage premiered at The National Theatre in 1996 and the film right has been sold. In 2003 he received the Icelandic Literature Prize and the Icelandic Bookseller's Prize for his novel *Öxin og jörðin* (The Axe and the Earth).

Some of Ólafur's work has been translated into other languages, the children's book *Fallegi flughvalurinn* (The Beautiful Flying Whale, 1999) has been published in Britain, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and The Faeroe Islands, and was nominated to the Nordic Children's Literature Award in 1990. The book *Tröllakirkja* is his only novel which was translated into German: "Niemand wie ich", Steidl, Göttingen 2004.

Ólafur Gunnarsson has also translated various works of fiction into Icelandic, including the novel *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac and *The Maltese Falcon*, by Dashiell Hammett.

HOW I BECAME A WRITER

by Ólafur Gunnarsson

Sometimes, I have been asked: How did it occur to you to spend your life making up stories, writing articles and such things? Many people think that this is a very remarkable vocation. Far from it. It came about because of some shaving foam and a bowl of sweet-soup.

Almost 30 years ago I was convinced that nothing fitted me better than becoming a salesman. I took on a job at a small company that sold various small merchandice. The former salesman, named Albert, went on the first round with me to introduce me to the store managers. Certain rituals were in place. Albert had been very popular. We have been happy with Albert, the store manager at Kaupfélag Árnesinga said. He always keeps his word and I gratefully value that. Konni for instance, that devil, promised to bring me rubber boots this spring, but then he didn't deliver. I don't do buseness with him anymore.

Afterwards, Albert told me that Konni was one of the most popular guys in the business. Then he sent me to a barber shop to try to sell some after shave lotion. This was in Selfoss. A man was sitting in the barber chair. His face was all covered in foam. Nevertheless, he was scribbling something on a paper. When the barber and I were alone, I learned that this had been Guðmundur Daníelsson, the writer. Albert and I continued on to Vík in Mýrdalur and stayed over at a hotel.

A month later I was by myself on a trip east. This time, I brought along a pair of rubber boots, as I was determined to take over Konni's business, him having let everyone down in the spring. The store manager was busy and asked me to stop by on the way back. Apart from me, only one other man was in the dining room at Hotel Vík that evening. He was an older gentleman with snow white hair. We had meatballs and sweet-soup for dinner. I asked the waitress who this gentleman was and she informed me that Oscar Clausen, the writer, was sitting there writing a book for the coming Christmas season. Oscar had finished his meatballs. She took his plate and brought the sweet-soup.

Oscar Clausen put down a few lines on a piece of paper in the meantime. I started contemplating what an easy life it was for those writers. On the way back to Reykjavík, I checked in with the store manager. A half eaten bun, rather badly looking, was laying on the table in the cafeteria. I showed him the boots which were supposed to replace Konni's goods. But just as the manager is about to place an order he happens to look out the window, exclaiming right away: There's the devil! Konni the salesman walked in. He was a podgy fellow. He said: Hi guys, and took a seat as if nothing was more natural; this very man who had been caught cheating so badly. The manager started arguing. Konni acted indifferent. He half closed his eyes and looked around nonchalantly until the half eaten bun caught his eye. This bun is too tempting, he said, reaching out for it. The bun broke the ice. I held up my boots, but the game was lost. Konni ate the bun, he had brought some boots, a bit more expensive than mine, but what the hell, they would last much longer. On that they both agreed.

Right there, in the cafeteria it dawned on me that I was in the wrong trade. I thought about Guðmundur Daníelsson sitting in the barber chair and Oscar Clausen with the sweet-soup. As a result, I went out into the store and bought a notebook and a pen. When I said farewell the manager and Konni were talking amiably about different small merchandice which Konni had to offer.

I on the other hand was determined to have a comfortable life. I became a writer.

THE WINTER JOURNEY (1999)

written by Hilmar Oddsson / translated by Hulda Kristín Jónsdóttir

The Winter Journey (*Vetrarferðin*) is the story of Sigrún Gísladóttir, a caterer in Reykjavík between the years 1943 and 1950. The story spans over a seven year period, during which Sigrún makes the transition from a poor housewife and mother of two to a successful entrepreneur, owner and manager of one of the capitals most prestigious hotels.

Her success comes at a tremendous personal price. She faces what seems to be an endless string of disasters and in a short time loses all those close to her. Despite this, she remains resolute throughout and refuses to give in to her suffering. The story is inspired by the book of Job in the Old Testament where God continually tests Job's faith by exposing him to suffering and various tasks that challenge his faith.

The story begins as Sigrún's marriage has been irreparably damaged, on discovering her husband Sigurgestur's infidelity with a young woman in the countryside, and the fact that his mistress is carrying his child. In an act of defiance toward her husband Sigrún applies for a job at Hotel Hekla and is offered the position, on the condition that she has sex with Kristján G, the manager of the hotel. Sigurgestur reacts to her disobedience by beating her and accusing her of adultery with an American GI. Sigrún feels that she has no other choice but to leave her husband and two children behind and does so with a heavy heart.

Ironically Sigrún actually becomes involved with an American soldier shortly after leaving her husband. She meets Michael at Hotel Borg and an immediate sexual attraction leads to a night of passion in a rented room downtown. The following day Sigrún and a handful of other young women are rounded up by the police under the suspicion that they are prostituting themselves to foreign army officers. One of the women is Johanna, a girl of 14 from the countryside. Johanna is later taken in by Sigrún, who treats her as her own and brings her up alongside her two sons.

Shortly afterwards Sigrún's older son Skúli dies suddenly after being driven into the wilderness, by a group of American soldiers and left to walk back to town, in freezing conditions. Prolonged exposure to the cold weather had led to a fatal bout of meningitis. The tragedy results in Sigrún moving back home temporarily only to receive the news, some weeks later that her ex husband has been found drowned in the harbour, and is suspected of killing another man.

Sigrún soon becomes acquainted with Pétur, a cook on a local trawler who desperately tries to win her affections. She rents him a room and in an attempt to woo her, he and his shipmates help her to renovate a small shed she has purchased into a small café. One of the men helping is Halldór, who Sigrún enjoys a one night stand with on the opening night of the café. She is blissfully unaware of the fact that Halldór is in fact engaged and she soon realises that she is pregnant by him.

Sigrún's younger son Guðmundur Steinn is determined to go to sea and although Sigrún is against the idea, she finally has to give in. He promptly joins the crew of a cargo ship, alongside Pétur and Halldór. Tragically, the ship is attacked by a German submarine and although Pétur and Halldór survive, her son does not make it alive.

Pétur and Sigrún have cohabited for some time and Pétur lives in the hope that she will marry him eventually. His love for her is unrequited but the living arrangements suit Sigrún's circumstances. Matters are further complicated by the fact that the young girl Johanna becomes infatuated with Pétur.

Sigrún gives birth to Halldór's baby and immediately gives the child away to a family in the countryside. Pétur returns to the sea and is reported missing after his ship sinks. On hearing of his disappearance Halldór offers to leave his fiancé in order to live with Sigrún but his plans are put on hold as Pétur returns alive and unhurt.

During this period Kristján G. takes his own life in Copenhagen and leaves his life insurance to Sigrún on the grounds that she had been his greatest sexual conquest. Sigrún is able to buy the bankrupt estate of Hotel Hekla with the money and Pétur helps her to run the business. Subsequently Pétur becomes unwell and is diagnosed with tuberculosis. Coincidentally Jóhanna becomes sick with the same disease and they spend the rest of their days being cared for at a nursing home for tuberculosis sufferers.

Halldór finally moves in with Sigrún and shortly afterwards they become the parents of two boys. Some years later Kristján's ashes are buried and this event reignites Sigrún's feelings of grief for her past loss and she is momentarily overcome. However she soon regains her composure and goes on to face any future challenges that the Almighty may throw in her path with the same courage and faith she has shown in the past.

SELECTED BOOKS

Trolls' Cathedral (*Tröllakirkja* 1992)

The year is 1953. An architect yearns to build a cathedral echoing the shapes of the landscape, the arc of a seabird's wing, the hollows of a cliff-face. Yet his current project, plagued by uncertainty and debt, is for the first franchise department store in Reykjavik. A single seemingly random act, an assault on his young son in the unfinished shell of the store, will destroy the family. Obsessions, dreams and difficult memories lead inevitably to violence. Rights sold: UK (Mare's Nest), Germany (Steidl), France (Gaïa), The Czech Republic (Host)

"Of all the contemporary Icelandic authors that German readers have had an opportunity to read in translation, Olafur Gunnarsson is the one who most obviously picked up the torch from his great colleague and predecessor Halldor Laxness. He also paints an impressive portrait of how contemporary social and economic changes have affected traditional Icelandic society." Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

"Trolls' Cathedral is a formidable work, mesmerically readable." Times Literary Supplement

"A homespun picture of Icelandic life in flux is the result, tradition falling prey to modernity, values in chaos, ... the characters emerge with clarity to serve a theme both grand and simple." Mail on Sunday

"Trolls' Cathedral is a sincere novel, entertaining and gripping." DV newspaper

"The storyline is unexpected and unusual, truly a gripping tale and beautifully told by the author." Alþýðublaðið newspaper

Potter's Field (*Blóðakur* 1996)

Based on actual political intrigue in Iceland in the early twentieth century but set in modern-day Iceland, Potter's Field is an epic tale of three distinguished families and a Catholic priest. The Families suffer all the problems of an ordinary family, and some more, in spite of their wealth and influence. Potter's Field is the second volume in Gunnarsson's trilogy, this one focusing on the themes of guilt, responsibility and tragedy.

In this disturbing and black-humoured novel the families of Theódóra, Vilhelmína and Dagný are variously linked by blood, guilt and greed in a world divided between wealth and poverty, and between political power and political impotence. In contrast, the Roman Catholic priest, Father Bernhardur, though doubting his vocation and his faith, is a humane and dedicated man. Through

the three wives and their children, including a Serbian child in Theódóra's foster care, he becomes intricately involved in the problems and conflicts within their families. Linda, Theódóra's religious and visionary stepdaughter, alone embodies Gudmundsson's belief in the possibility of redemption and transcendence in tragedy. Rights sold: UK (Mare's Nest)

"Ólafur Gunnarsson is a great virtuoso ... If I were in the habit of giving stars, I would give Potter's Field a few constellations." Helgarposturinn Weekly

"If we were still in the habit of wearing hats, I would take my hat off to Potter's Field. But since hats are no longer the rage, I must make do with a deep bow." Dagur-Tíminn newspaper

"The novel is written with a wonderful feel for the absurd and grotesque that underlies human actions and aspirations. I couldn't put the book down until I had finished it." Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, President of Iceland 1980–1996

The Axe and the Earth (*Öxin og jörðin* 2003)

The Axe and the Earth is an historical novel based on one of the most dramatic events in Icelandic history, when the catholic bishop Jón Arason and his two sons were executed by the leaders of the reformation. This is an exceptionally well written story about faith and doubt and how the struggle for power dominates the actions of characters who step forward from the mists of the past. The human qualities of Gunnarsson's characters make their tragedy only too tangible in our own principle-testing times. The book received the Icelandic Literature Prize 2003 and the Icelandic Booksellers' Prize 2003. Rights sold: Lithuania (Pasvires Pasaulis)

"A strikingly good book. A novel of power and magnitude, compiled with great insight and spell-binding intensity." TV Channel 2

"Absolutely compelling. This book was worth waiting for." The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service

"Exceedingly well written." Fréttablaðið newspaper

"Both exciting and powerful ... I couldn't put this book down." The Literature web

"A grand and ambitious saga ... The chapters on the execution of Jón Arason and his sons are very dramatic and will strike a chord with all readers." Fréttablaðið newspaper

Head Ransom (*Höfuðlausn* 2005)

It's the summer of 1919 and Reykjavík is suddenly transformed from a village into a town, when a troupe of actors and film crew come to Iceland to shoot Gunnar Gunnarsson's famous Family Saga. Jakob Ólafsson, a young man who runs his own taxi service, drives the foreigners around, and before he knows it, falls in love with the leading lady. Jakob encounters several famous personages along his journey: the poet Thorsteinn Erlingsson, the painter Muggur, Thor Jensen the ship owner, the unforgettable journalist Árni Óli and the writer Knut Hamsun. "Head Ransom" is also a love story. There is not just one but two women in Jakob's life when he meets Ásthildur Björnsdóttir, an apprentice goldsmith. But just as Jakob seems to be on the point of finding happiness, his life takes a twist and reserves him and his close ones an unexpected fate.

"This is a massive and magnificent work and to my mind Ólafur Gunnarsson is here at his best. It's my opinion that Head Ransom will later be acknowledged to be one of his best books." Kistan.is

"A terrific historical novel ... written with exceptional mastery of style ... adventurous ... very lively." Icelandic TV

"A gripping and an interesting book. Olafur is an excellent writer and he does not shoot of the mark in Head Ransom." Vikan Magazine

"Head Ransom is a battering ram of a book." Fréttablaðið Newspaper

"A gripping narrative, exceptionally good handling of the subject ... interesting multi faceted work." bokmenntir.is Literature website

"Olafur weaves together fiction and facts with his extraordinary skills." Morgunblaðið newspaper

"Olafur strikes right to the point with his entertaining work which grips the attention of the reader and does not let go until the final page." Fréttablaðið

Dark Roses (*Dimmar Rósir* 2008)

The stage is Reykjavik in the years 1969 to 1971, years of conflict between the old time and the new, years of cultural revolution and ideological combat; the years when Kinks and Led Zeppelin hold concerts in Iceland, young people look towards the future in a state either of expectation or intoxication, as the case may be, and the older generation really don't know what hit them. The dramatis personae is formed by two picturesque families in town. The characters come in all sizes and shapes; from the rebellious teenage girl to the well-meaning theology student, from the longhaired drummer to the old car mechanic, from the colourless accountant to the actress who is permanently on stage. The action is spun around the fates of these two families, unexpectedly entwined together in an enthralling read. The author is among Iceland's best storytellers. In this book he paints a vibrant portrait of a period and a set of characters faces with the fundamental issues of integrity and ethics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1970: Ljóð (Poems)
- 1976: Upprisan eða undan ryklokinu (Resurrection, or From Underneath the Dustlid) poetry
- 1977: Hrognkelsin: Cyclopteri Lumpi (The Lumpfish) poetry
- 1978: Milljón prósent menn (Million Percent Men) novel
- 1980: Ljóstollur (Light Duty) novel
- 1984: Gaga (Gaga) novel
- 1986: Heilagur andi og englar vítis (Holy Spirit and the Angels of Hell) novel
- 1989: Fallegi flughvalurinn (The Beautiful Flying Whale) children's book
- 1989: Regnbogastrákurinn (The Rainbow Boy) children's play
- 1990: Sögur úr Skuggahverfinu (Tales from the Shadows) short stories
- 1992: Tröllakirkja (Troll's Cathedral) novel
- 1993: Snæljónin (The Snow Lions) children's book
- 1996: Blóðakur (Potter's Field) novel
- 1997: Tröllakirkja (Troll's Cathedral) audiobook
- 1999: Vetrarferðin (Winter Journey) novel
- 1999: Fallegi flughvalurinn og sagan af litla stjörnukerfinu (The Beautiful Flying Whale and the Tale of the Galaxy) children's book
- 2003: Öxin og jörðin (The Axe and the Earth) novel
- 2005: Höfuðlausn (Head's Ransom) novel
- 2007: Fallegi flughvalurinn og Leifur óheppni (The Beautiful Flying Whale and Leif the Unlucky) children's book
- 2008: Dimmar Rósir (Dark Roses) novel

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