



SAGENHAFTE BÜCHER

Sigurbjörg Þrastardóttir
The story of Sol



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sigurbjörg Þrastardóttir was born on August 27, 1973 in Akranes in West Iceland. She completed a B.A. degree in comparative literature at the University of Iceland in 1997 and a degree in journalism and mass communication from the same university in 1998. Sigurbjörg works as a journalist for Morgunblaðið newspaper, alongside her work as a writer.

Sigurbjörg's first book, the poetry collection Blálogaland (Land of Blue Flames), was published in 1999 and since then she has published two other books of poetry and the novel Sólar saga (The story of Sol). Sólar saga received the Tómas Guðmundsson Literary Award in 2002. In addition to this Sigurbjörg has written the stand up play Egglos (Ovulation) which was staged by Akureyri Theatre in 2003-4. The piece is one of three plays awarded in a competition run by the theatre. Sigurbjörg has received more awards for her work, as an example her book of poetry, Hnattflug (Circumnavigation) was chosen as the best book of poetry by the staff of Icelandic bookstores in 2000. Sigurbjörg's poetry has appeared in magazines and collections in Iceland and abroad, in Germany, Scotland, Italy and Sweden among other countries. Sigurbjörg has also participated in various literary festivals and poetry exhibitions. She is one of the so called Grafarvogur-poets, calling themselves by the Reykjavík suburb that is their home, and had a poem in their joint poetry-exhibition in September 2002.

Sigurbjörg Þrastardóttir lives in Reykjavík.

THE STORY OF SOL (2002)

Brief synopsis

Sólar saga is the story of Sól, who is a young Icelandic girl living in an Italian city, where she studies at a school for interpreters. We are informed that she has stayed in this country for a number of summers, working at the wine acres, but is now mostly focusing on her studies. Apart from her interest in languages the girl is very artistically minded, having inherited this from her grandfather who in his youth travelled around Europe, painting and drawing. The novel describes how she is trying to regain a sense of her life after having been attacked and raped and stabbed with a knife. Her method is to reconcile herself with the city she has lived in for a long time and is very fond of, and the reconciliation process involves walking around the city and hugging the myriad of columns that she passes.

The book received the Tomas Gudmundsson Literary Award in 2002

REVIEWS

Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir, literary critic, 2002, www.bokmenntir.is

“Many things are well executed in this novel, even though it is a beginner’s work. The reader feels a strong sympathy for the girl. The story is well written and Sigurbjörg depicts vivid images of these two different countries, Iceland and Italia. When she is at her best I was so drawn into the story that I almost took out the sunglasses and started brushing the dust from the columns off my clothes.”

This girl is reminiscent of the girl with the strong sensibilities that appears as the narrator of Sigurbjörg’s poetry, a girl with a very special feeling for nature, a lively sense of humour and independent approach to language and imagery. This is a narrator that is prepared to wonder and take pleasure in the unexpected happenings of everyday life and brings us news about them.”

Stúdentablaðið newspaper

“The reader is deeply moved ... Þrastardóttir here depicts the effects of gross abuse in a vivid, effective manner. The Story of Sól is a rewarding read for all those who love good fiction ... The reader is left with beautiful words and hope in his soul.”

DV newspaper

“Þrastardóttir expands on the familiar yet delicate theme of rape and violence in a text which is both well-written and remarkably vivid ... powerful and convincing ... about a person who has been robbed of the most precious thing she had: faith in life and love.”

Judges’ assessment

“Compelling and impressive ... written with remarkable style and art.”

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

[7-8]

19 thousand burning buildings

1.

The crack of dawn in a rust-red city on the twelfth day. The thermometers are rising, a shaggy cat runs round the corner behind a woman in a skirt, breadcrumbs scatter over worn cobblestones. A road sweeper rushes after them, whirling up dust with his broom, it hasn't rained for a long while here. I stand in the middle of the street, reach out cautiously, my cardigan stretches. Wordless buildings on either side, the railway station in the distance and bicycles with woven baskets up against the walls, the wickerwork starting to fray in places, I have a bicycle stored away too but don't feel up to climbing on it for the time being. Inhale slowly and look along the street, this is the white moment when the sky has just torn off its nightcap but the sun is still lost behind a building with a spire.

Stand in the middle of the street, ready, I am the only one who knows. This is the place I dreamed last night, I shall set off from here and soon my eyes will be dazzled.

My face is not scarred, which is fortunate. It makes many things easier. I can tie up my brick-red hair without revealing anything, answer children with colourful rucksacks when they say hello, I can look the newspaper vendors in the eye when they mutter something about beauty, if it comes to that, but I have plenty of other things to think about, must not dally, yes, the point is to do this properly and that's why I won't speak a word to anyone except after careful consideration. Best to run into as few people as possible. And that is quite conceivable, because the city is just starting to stir, few people are up and about.

Myself, I woke up long ago, I practised on my quilt all night, spreading out my wan arms, moving them together, hugging. The pain in my upper arm is hardly worth complaining about, so much else heals a lot more slowly. Fell asleep as late as ever but only dreamed this street and only woke up twice.

[9]

[out on the street again the little body and always hot as ever but deep inside everything cold like a steel key turning in soft dough my neck stiff still hurts to touch my shoulder blade but it's all coming along]

[14-15]

You have to hug buildings properly just like any other people. The first few days I find it a little strange, stretch my arms forward, place my palms on the thighs of a pillar and pull myself towards it. Wait a moment and feel that everyone is looking at me, which is probably quite right. Then I quickly loosen my grip and take a few steps. But I don't make enough effort.

When there are few people within sight I practise some more. Place my cheek against the pillar's warm breast and rest my head on my shoulder, try to feel the pillar breathing, must tighten my embrace. I gradually get the knack of it. But people look at me. Stare.

I sprawl against a pillar on the Via Nazario Sauro which is a narrow street with tired buildings. An elderly woman in a green coat walks past with four bags that rustle, she's coming from the vegetable market that shuts at a quarter past one. She slows down, looks down and then back up, stops in her tracks and watches me. Clears her throat. She is wearing thick tights and black shoes. I imagine a scent of fruit from her shoes. She stays there dawdling, then calmly inches closer and asks if everything's all right. I nod, tighten my grip on the pillar.

– Are you quite sure? the woman asks.

I clench my eyes shut, in other respects keeping stationary, waiting until the woman has gone. She keeps standing there looking at me, I can tell, then asks me if I want a banana. I say nothing. She loosens one of my palms which is glued behind the pillar and puts a cold banana into it, pats the back of my hand and says:

– There you are. And try to take things easy.

When I have counted up to twelve she has left with her bags, I have branches of trees in my throat.

It's no coincidence that I think about pillars as if they are people. The second year I was here I bought an art history book with ancient drawings in it which matched the pillars to the human anatomy. These were scientific sketches yet almost nonchalantly drawn, I thought that was clever. The volute at the top was a crown on a head, the capital was a human head, the pillar itself the body and the plinth the soles of the feet. I don't know whether I would have noticed this analogy if I had not bought that book. That was almost four years ago and then it got lost when I moved house, maybe it was left behind in the south under a striped mattress.

I look at the archway on the building opposite and try to envisage a person in each pillar, like a whole platoon or family standing there fossilized. I can make out my grandfather, father, sisters, mother ... but grandmother is nowhere to be seen. They are all standing there perfectly still with their hands behind their backs, staring into space. The weight of the buildings rests on the tops of their heads, pressing them down.

I don't know whether it's good or bad, having people from back home on the brain like that. I lie down on the nearest bench and look up at the snow-white clouds, recite an old prayer and accidentally let out a curse half-way through it.

[29-30]

[no I didn't say a thing when they started didn't even say prayers no change of expression didn't scream until the very end but I thrashed around until my heels bled the back of my neck bled almost nothing you can say at the most spit or vomit must keep quiet so I can cry in silence lie completely still]

If a place is bad you should never go back there. If a place is good you shouldn't stay there too long either. No one has told me this, best to forget the bad place and remember the good place the way it is, dangerous to return because everything could be turned upside-down or repeat itself. But no one knows which will happen until it's too late.

[34-35]

The plastering on some of the pillars has started to thin after being worn down by the centuries, in many places it crumbles if you press up against it, I sneeze sometimes because I cannot stand the dust and some days my chest and stomach are grey. I never brush my clothes clean, not until I've gone home, then I dust the powder off into a little jar. I know I could just as easily go to the nearest beach and fetch a handful of sand but the nearest beach isn't anywhere near within walking distance. Nor do I want sand, I have black sands back home, I want the powder from pillars from the city of sunsets and tomorrow I'm going to wear a woollen sweater that shows it up particularly well.

At cafés I'm sometimes asked whether I'm an architect, painter or art restorer, it's my appearance: covered in dust from head to toe but only on my front. An old man asked me today if I was a road sweeper.

[still bruised skin and bones the anonymous doctor said but I tried not to think with my body thought more about my shirt a shame it got ripped have to have it mended have to send my jeans to the cleaners get them back deathly smooth no one must suspect a thing I'd be smart once again]

[37-38]

I don't know any chronology. Everything that's old is old, just like everything that's small is small, I learned that early on.

– I'm almost eight, I said in the tough negotiations about going fishing with my father and big sister, it was September then too and it was raining. My sister said I was too small to go with them but my father said I could come if I promised to make an effort. He handed us some wellington boots.

– I'm a lot older than you though, my sister underlined in a whisper.

– But I'm older than little sister, I replied.

– Yes, but I'm older than the two of you put together. And little sister could overtake you too.

– Is that possible?

– Of course.

– How come?

– Like if you sleep the whole night while she stays awake, then she wins a day.

– Is that possible?

– You bet.

– Dad, will little sister be bigger than me soon?

– Yes, if you don't eat all the fish we bring home tonight. Hurry up, the one who catches the biggest trout can sleep in tomorrow, my father called out and strode off in his big waders.

The fish I caught was as big as big sister's but I didn't sleep in. Instead, I started keeping myself awake for half the night or more to keep my lead on that black fluffy creature in the sitting room. Until one day I fainted onto my plate of mashed saltfish. Someone who's small is small – even though someone else is even smaller.

Later on, mother cooked foreign food much more often, especially when I was home. She thought I missed all the foreign cuisine but I said I preferred fish, no pizzas, no pasta sauces, no olive oil.

– I get enough of that abroad, I said.

– So you're going back then, my mother said without looking up. Then she sighed and counted an unnecessary quantity of potatoes into the pot.

I haven't told my mother that I've almost completely stopped cooking, that I don't feel like eating, I won't tell her about the repulsion that comes over me in the yellow light in the bathroom.

[maybe four weeks maybe three I keep remembering more and more try to stare at the flaking plaster but everything comes back my body a tiny bit stronger it remembers less and less but still a pain in my shoulder and inside me my membranes are flaking but I know I'll get better maybe it will take days and years]

[68-69]

I've noticed how the labourers here who stand under scaffolding with their yellow helmets generally never hold any tools. At the most a wheelbarrow full of concrete is up propped against the nearest wall, but mostly the men stand around waiting for orders from someone at the top of the building. Perhaps to lower something down, perhaps to hoist something up. The same orange canvas is draped over all the buildings that are being repaired. Nothing is ever built here, just repaired. And at the bottom stand those labourers in their dirty boots like zombies staring open-mouthed at every passer-by in a skirts as if in hope of being paid extra for it. At first I used to make cutting remarks to that kind of men, now I've stopped saying anything, now I only see them out of the corner of my eye, now I don't wear skirts any more either. When I've spent a long time hugging I can't even hear them whistling, my sense of balance fades, I start walking into road signs, get caught up in dogs' leashes, everything is in motion and fragmentary sentences reach me from the murmuring:

– ... ci vediamo alla partita ... non capisco una cosa ... ha ancora la febbre ... ma sempre la stessa cravatta ...

I don't know what those people are talking about, gradually I cease to understand the language that I've nonetheless been speaking for four years, I cannot hear and I want to lie down. But if I lie down I shall never get up again, so I lean up against a pillar with my arms dangling and my cheek against the

stone. Keeping still is cold but I can't move my arms and legs.

Lying on your stomach with your arms by your sides is a locked position. Someone lying like that has given up, he's stopped trying to defend himself, he's the weakest creature in the forest. I lay like that well into the long night, chewing and dribbling on the soil and I knew that soon my saliva would dry up and my blood would stop flowing and the spasms would fade away and then I'd stop hearing and night would come and more nights would come and very slowly I would waste away to glacier-white bones there in the forest. And the children who'd find my remains on a school outing could use my clothes for handicraft because children in this country make black witches from old scraps of clothing and set fire to them on Twelfth Night, all evil is burnt with the old woman in rags but a few glacier-white bones would be left in the forest, gnawed by brown dogs.

If your misfortune can benefit children and dogs, then the suffering is not in vain.

[72-73]

The afternoon sun pierces the weakest clouds, I look at the buildings on the piazza and wonder what it costs to rent a flat in such a place. I'm bored with my flat on Via Petroni, I want to be in another neighbourhood. I don't dream well enough, the furniture is still the wrong way round.

I walk up to the golden buildings, several pillars at the bottom of them look as if they're carved out of rock. I run my palms over the surface and am suddenly astonished that no one ever thought of carving pillars from the feet of the mountains back home. Then you could walk beneath the mountains, through an archway, people would flock from all corners of the world to see the incredible interplay of geology and architecture. Japanese and Italian package tours, safety helmets included in the price. The village could do with some new faces, hotter blood.

I go home to dry my clothes because I know it's not unfounded, people's fear of catching cold. The humidity ensures that no one dries up of their own accord even when the rain stops. But the winter isn't anywhere near yet, far from it. You can tell winter from the fur collars that sprout up, you can tell it from the way that the city people have their hair cut less often but go to the solarium more and are always at the chemist's buying cough tablets, they have an unwavering faith in tablets.

[want to catch pneumonia nasty influenza an excuse to go back to bed and take patterned tablets with warm water I want a thermometer and someone who says that the prognosis is very serious]

RECHTE

Forlagið

Bræðraborgarstíg 7
101 Reykjavík
Island
Tel: +354 / 575 5600
Fax: +354 / 575 5601
forlagid@forlagid.is

www.forlagid.is

KONTAKT

The Icelandic Literature Fund

Austurstræti 18
101 Reykjavík
Island
bok@bok.is

www.bok.is

Sagenhaftes Island

Projektbüro Deutschland
Veteranenstr. 21
10119 Berlin
Tel: 030 4402 4121
info@sagenhaftes-island.de

Sagenhaftes Island

Ministerium für Bildung,
Wissenschaft und Kultur
Sölvholsgata 4
150 Reykjavík
Island
Tel: +354 561 5762
info@sagenhaftes-island.is

www.sagenhaftes-island.de

