

## FISHY TALE

Respected audience, let me begin by saying that I know what you are thinking:

You are wondering if it is possible that an Icelandic press meeting can be coming to an end without any of the esteemed speakers having so much as mentioned fish. You are right, it is amazing that fish has not featured in some way or other in every speech made so far. Either as hard facts about what we must call "making a living" on our remote North-Atlantic island or as a melancholic metaphor for how every Icelander who leaves his country is drawn back to its shores like the salmon that returns to spawn in the wild mountain river where it was spawned itself.

But, do not worry, there are still plenty of fish in the seas around Iceland, and they swim as nimbly there as they do in our own cod-liver-oil-fuelled minds. It is just that we are always hoping to be perceived as a modern-day people (to be seen walking in step with the contemporary cultural elite of the grand capitals of the continental empires), so we do our best to keep up appearances, especially here at the Frankfurt Book Fair ...

Still, as all of us have learnt from our grandmothers, one must not only think of oneself (even though that is the subject matter that must content an islander for most of the time). So, please allow me to be the one to meet your expectations, let me tell you a story with a fish in it ... But before I begin I must apologise to those of you interested in saltwater fish, for the fish in my tale is neither cod nor herring, seal nor squid, nor is it in any way related to that mysterious and much-feared devourer of drowned sailors, the narwhal — it is a small fish, a spry little thing, a fabulous fish from the freshest of all fresh waters ...

Recently an anonymous new self-help group was founded in Reykjavík. As one of its founders is a night watchman at the National Museum they are allowed to hold their meetings in its cellar every second Monday evening. And there, in a small room that serves the double purpose of storing the museum's collection of midwifery instruments and the handful of Roman coins found in the country, the members of the group sit in a half circle and talk about how onerous their condition is, about the prejudices against them, about how difficult it is for them to find a place in modern Icelandic society, and so forth, as it is no easy fate to be born of a male in a world where most humans are born of females.

In the rivulets and springs of Iceland, you see, there lives a rare breed of freshwater fish called the “furry trout”. To all appearance it looks like the arctic char except that instead of the usual rose and silver-coloured scales it sports a coat of brownish fur. It is said to taste somewhat similar to an ordinary trout and when skinned to look exactly the same. So — understandably — it happens once in awhile that it is mistaken for its scaly cousin and ends up in the frying pan in its place. And therein lies the danger, for should a man accidentally eat a furry trout he will become pregnant.

A man who becomes pregnant from eating a furry trout goes through the whole burdensome nine months of pregnancy as any woman would, apart from the last three months when the foetus settles in his surprisingly elastic scrotum. So when it comes to giving birth (we have no better word for it) the scrotum is swiftly cut open and the crying infant is delivered into the world. It is estimated that each year up to eleven children are born in this manner in Iceland, a far smaller number than in past centuries, but a real and urgent problem nevertheless. For all too easily these poor children become the subject of ridicule.

As is well known in the civilised world we, the Icelanders, have no gift for philosophy, no knowledge of politics, religion or ideologies, the sciences are beyond our grasp—both the abstract and the physical—nor are we (I am ashamed to confess) skilled in economics; yes, the only ability we seem to have developed during the 1100 years we have inhabited our island is to tell stories.

So, there you have it, a fishy tale from Iceland — and the real reason why we have come to your magnificent halls, saddled with literature from the past and the present. It is simply a pretence so that the plight of the sons and daughters of men who have eaten furry trout can be heard. But not only do we care for them, we also feel responsible for those of our unfortunate brothers and sisters who are the offspring of the numerous encounters Icelandic women have had with various kinds of supernatural entity, whether Elf-Kings, mermen, water-horses or cunning dream men.

We think that their stories deserve to be known. We trust that you will ignore the smell of cod-liver-oil filling your nostrils, trust that you will sit still for years to come, that you will listen — and be moved to compassion ...