

Háskóli Íslands

Hugvísindasvið

Enska

Exploring the Legacy of Halldór Laxness

*Contemporary English-language Perspectives on Iceland's Greatest
Twentieth-Century Writer*

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í ensku

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Abstract

In 1955, the Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature to Halldór Kiljan Laxness, who was at the time a controversial yet highly-venerated Icelandic novelist. Although his most notable work, *Independent People*, appeared in English translation as a popular Book-of-the-Month-Club selection just prior to his Nobel win, Laxness largely faded from public consciousness in the English-speaking world for decades thereafter, falling out of U.S. publishers' favor due to his strident left-wing and anti-American views, among other reasons. During the late 1990s, American writer, professor, and Laxness enthusiast Brad Leithauser lobbied and convinced Vintage International to reprint Laxness' works in English. However, this prolonged absence has, undoubtedly, taken its toll on the celebrated author's legacy in the U.S, diminishing his readership, thereby complicating further literary research.

Although fresh English translations of several of Laxness' major works have recently emerged, a dearth of rich, contemporary critical perspective about them persists within American academic circles. Because Laxness remains a towering, influential literary figure in Iceland and across Scandinavia, his works merit greater critical attention in English, and his myriad contributions to world literature certainly warrant reexamination. Using personal anecdotes, interviews with writers and public figures, and archival research, this thesis seeks to explore and investigate the complex causes behind Laxness' decades-long disappearance from the U.S. book market, as well as prompt a renewed conversation, in English, about the relevance of Laxness' art in the twenty-first century.

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thoroughly enjoyed the many conversations we had via email and in coffee shops across Reykjavík. I consider them among the highlights of my extended stay in Iceland.

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Preface: How a Young Texan Became Interested in Halldór Laxness

When I was seventeen-years old, I bought a copy of Icelandic singer Björk's sixth studio album *Medúlla*, a purchase that unexpectedly altered the course of my academic career. After downloading the CD onto my iPod, I remember sprawling out on my bed, closing my eyes, and immersing myself in the record's outlandish beats and experimental sounds. However, as I listened to the album's fourth track "Vökuró"—a somber melody sung entirely in Icelandic—I was instantly captivated by the poetic beauty and metrical intricacy of the Icelandic lyrics.

Within days of hearing the song, I ordered a *Teach Yourself Icelandic* curriculum, determined to master this language that had so inexplicably captured my imagination. Since I was a Texas resident with no prior experience learning Nordic languages, my initial attempts at pronouncing lengthy Icelandic words sounded more like "Tex-landic" than Icelandic. Still, I devoted many hours after school to completing grammar drills and reciting texts, until I achieved a basic level of spoken and written proficiency. This interest in Icelandic gradually blossomed into a passion for researching the nation's rich cultural history, which led to yet another life-altering purchase just one year later.

I distinctly remember the first time I learned of Halldór Laxness, Iceland's greatest modern writer and only Nobel laureate to date. I was eighteen-years-old and in my first semester at Texas State University. I was studying to become an art teacher at the time, but outside of class, I had been cultivating a burgeoning passion for literature and creative writing, in addition to my interest in Icelandic language and culture. One hectic afternoon, as I was driving to campus to take a massive mid-term exam, I decided to stop by a Hastings bookstore in San

Marcos, Texas, to do what I always did to alleviate stress: peruse the shelves of used bookshops and pick out the most intriguing yet affordable book I could find.

While indulging this bad habit—which would always make my tuition payments at the beginning of each semester slightly more difficult to stomach—I stumbled upon a blue-covered book by travel journalist Paul Walker entitled *Waking Up in Iceland*. Published in the early 2000s, the book explores the origins and key drivers of the Icelandic music scene and includes some in-depth interviews with prominent Icelandic musicians and artists. Toward the beginning of the travelogue, Walker briefly summarizes the plot of *Independent People*, Laxness' most iconic novel, and hails its author as one of Iceland's great contemporary writers and most noteworthy public figures. In that moment, my interests in Icelandic culture, the Icelandic language, and literature seemed to fatefully converge. The storyline of *Independent People* sounded interesting, so I took a mental note of Laxness' name and resolved to look for a copy of the book on my next bookstore excursion.

During a family outing a couple weeks later, I visited a Barnes & Nobles bookshop in downtown San Antonio, Texas, where I found a Vintage International edition of the novel, stuffed on a bottom shelf in the literary fiction section. Despite being “new,” the pages of the novel were yellowed and musty and its binding was surprisingly loose. I gathered from its condition that the book had been sitting, completely untouched, on the bottom bookshelf since the store had opened years ago. Nevertheless, I took it home with me and, over the next few months, stole time in between classes, extracurricular activities, and homework assignments to read through the small print of the novel's 500+ pages. I was hooked, captivated by the novel's bold, dynamic characters and intrigued by the microcosmic yet rich world Laxness had fashioned throughout the tale. In short, *Independent People* enacts the tragedy of Bjartur, an intransigent

shepherd who, after being released from eighteen years of servitude, clings to his independent way of life, even as his farm, family, and homeland's social order crumble around him. The story and desolate setting could not have been further removed from my life as a poor university student in South Central Texas, but the riveting plot and characters, nevertheless, made a lasting impression on me.

After finishing *Independent People's* haunting, tragic final pages, I craved more information about Laxness' life and worldview, wanting to know more about his upbringing, his creative influences, and his philosophy of literature. I also wanted to read critical articles about his work, but I was surprised when my searches yielded underwhelming results. I scoured my university's library and the internet, purchasing a number of (expensive) out-of-print texts, all of which provided insight that, though informative, seemed dated and incomplete. I marveled: How could a man who procured the world's most prestigious literary honor, who wrote such vivid, compassionate novels, attract so little scholarly attention in the English-speaking world? I sought perspective on his writings; what I found was a helpful, but dissatisfying smattering of biography and literary history.

After spending a couple years collecting stray articles and outmoded texts on Laxness, I determined that in order to find the answers and gain the deeper perspective on his works that I sought, I would have to, one day, travel to Iceland—a daunting prospect for a destitute Texan with no Scandinavian heritage and no personal or professional links to the country. Undeterred, I began researching ways in which I could make this lofty dream a reality. Enter the U.S. Fulbright Program. A diplomatic scholarship program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, the Fulbright program awards competitive grants to students and professors from across the world to conduct specialized research or teach in other countries, usually for 5- to 9-month stints. Before I

could submit an application, I had to meet with Texas State University's campus Fulbright adviser to discuss my proposed research project and my academic background. Brimming with optimism, I soon learned that discovering Fulbright was a lot simpler than procuring a Fulbright award.

I will never forget my campus adviser's initial skepticism and confusion when I told her I wanted to apply for a Fulbright scholarship to study Icelandic language and literature. To her knowledge, I was the first Texas State student to ever express interest in studying in Iceland, or any Nordic country for that matter. Texas State University students, at that time, had a relatively dismal record of winning Fulbright scholarships, especially from the most competitive Western European countries, the ones where English is widely spoken. According to my adviser, many had tried before me, and many had failed. Her pessimism was sobering. However, I had a goal to accomplish, and my passion for Laxness' novels and my curiosity for his art superseded any doubts I had about applying. My adviser recommended that I work hard to maintain a superb academic record and pursue leadership opportunities outside of class, in order to make my Fulbright application stand out. Determined, I took her advice, volunteering as much as I could.

The next few years of my academic life were fruitful yet exhausting. In addition to taking five to six classes every semester, I ran student organizations, worked three jobs on campus, sat on university committees, conducted independent research, and routinely gave guest lectures across campus, informing my fellow students about the wonders of Icelandic culture and Halldór Laxness' legacy. I wrote an honors thesis about contemporary Icelandic literature and art, applying for small grants to support my research. I used the funds to buy novels and texts by Laxness, as well as some of his lesser-known contemporaries, such as novelist Gunnar Gunnarsson and playwright Guðmundur Kamban. I read and re-read Laxness' major novels

Independent People, *Salka Valka*, and *World Light*, longing to deepen my understanding of his style and his harsh, but sympathetic worldview. And, in October 2013, after a nerve-wracking interview with a skeptical campus Fulbright committee, I sent off my Fulbright research proposal and application. This effort initiated a grueling selection process that, I was warned, could take up to seven months.

The seemingly interminable wait was agonizing. During my final semester at Texas State, I student taught at a low-income rural high school in the Texas Hill Country. I drove forty minutes to and from work every morning and late afternoon, and then spent the rest of my evenings planning lessons, grading papers, and attending weekly Associated Student Government meetings at Texas State. Teaching adolescents was stressful enough; not knowing if I should be looking for a full-time teaching position for next year or booking flights to Iceland compounded my feelings of anxiety and enervation. I would check my email repeatedly in between lectures and school activities, nervously awaiting my acceptance or rejection. Nothing came.

On April 22, 2013, the week after I completed my student teaching internship, my acceptance letter finally arrived in my email. I was going to Iceland. The news was a relief, a much-needed and anticipated validation of my scholarship on Laxness' literature. The prospect of moving to an obscure Nordic nation might have seemed absurd to some of my Texan friends, but for me, winning this scholarship represented the fulfillment of a five-year dream, a chance to explore the world of my favorite author firsthand.

This thesis is the product of my three rigorous years of research in Iceland, which started with my time as a Fulbright scholar during the 2013-2014 academic year. It is a collection of scholarly essays and creative narratives about some of the most memorable and meaningful

experiences I've had while performing archival research on Laxness' life and works. Over the past three years, I have not only explored museums and cultural centers established in Laxness' honor but also spoken with his family members, as well as Icelandic professors, writers, and poets. My hope was to glean as much insight as I could about the author's past and the literary legacy he left behind so that I could share it with a new generation of English speakers.

Introduction: What Happened to Halldór Laxness? Making the Case for Laxness Studies in English for the Twenty-First Century

In 1955, the Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature to Halldór Laxness, who remained Iceland's most illustrious and controversial contemporary writer throughout much of the twentieth century. This award raised Laxness to the status of a cultural icon in Iceland and brought the newly-independent nation a brief surge of international media attention. Several years prior to winning the coveted honor, Laxness' masterpiece *Sjálfstætt Fólk* (*Independent People*, 1934) appeared in English translation and "became a best seller in the United States," as "it was a main selection by the Book-of-the-Month club and mailed to thousands of households around the country" (Lemoine, Halldór Laxness and the CIA, n. pg.). A critical and popular success, *Independent People*, to begin with, sold just under half a million copies, which, under normal circumstances, would have all but ensured the author's re-publication in the U.S.

However, this novel and Laxness fell from favor in 1948 after the publication of *Atomstöðin* (*The Atom Station*), a novel that comprised a scathing satire on the presence of American troops in Iceland. Thus, in the earliest years of the Cold War, Laxness was promptly blacklisted by the U.S. Government (Lemoine, Halldór Laxness and the CIA, n. pg) and those copies of *Independent People* that were not thrown away or destroyed, lay remaindered in second-hand bookstores all across the U.S. That remained the case until the late 1990s and it clearly took its toll on Laxness' legacy in the English-speaking world. Peter Hallberg's *Halldór Laxness* (1971), written in Swedish and translated into English, was and still is the only book-length critical study of Laxness' work in English to date. In the mid-1990s, however, there was a sudden change. Due primarily to the efforts of American novelist and poet, Brad Leithauser,

Independent People was republished and a number of Laxness' other translated novels followed suit. Shortly afterwards, some that had never been translated in English (e.g. *Íslandsklukkan*, translated into English by Philip Roughton as *Iceland's Bell*) began to appear. In addition to Leithauser, Pulitzer Prize-winner Jane Smiley and fellow Nobel laureate Alice Munro began to sing Laxness' praises and name him as an artistic influence on their own work. Thus, although Laxness' political views and subsequent obscurity temporarily hampered his international success, the enduring power of his poignant novels now resonates with a new generation of international readers, necessitating renewed scholarship, criticism and insight into his works for the modern, English-speaking public.

Born Halldór Guðjónsson in 1902, Laxness rose from the son of a humble stoneworker to a world-renowned writer, publishing his first novel at the young age of seventeen. Although Laxness was born in Iceland—at the time an obscure Danish colony—his literary works address more than just the insular matters of a remote island nation, cut off from the rest of the world's affairs. As Laxness' biographer Halldór Guðmundsson described in a recent interview, “his greatest strength as a novelist was always to make the microcosmic landscapes of his stories into a macrocosm...he'd write about a farmer in East Iceland and somehow make the story about the entire Fate of Man” (Guðmundsson, personal interview, November 18, 2014). He published over 60 novels, plays, short story collections, and essays in his lifetime, making him not only the most prominent Icelandic author of his time but also the most prolific. His celebrated novels—*World Light* (1937-1940), *Independent People*, and *Salka Valka* (1931-1932)—chronicle the daily struggles of Icelanders who lived during the harsh early years of the twentieth century, while simultaneously tackling some of the most enduring questions about the human condition.

Jane Smiley characterizes him as an author who “is in the Scandinavian tradition in the sense that he does not back away from pain or avert his gaze...his sense of landscape, and the effect of the land on those who live there, is very powerful [...] his characters seem to be part of the landscape they inhabit and depend upon [...] but he is also restless and innovative in the subjects he chooses, the ideas he explores, and the forms he tries” (J. Smiley, personal communication, November 14, 2014, my ellipses). Politically outspoken, some would say to a fault, Laxness also used his pen to illuminate the plight of the Icelandic farmer and to expose the widespread oppression of the poor both in his native country and abroad. Brad Leithauser notes how Laxness “successfully manages to contain and control so much impatience and rage [in his novels]...the lot of the Icelandic farmer, his exploitation by forces larger than he was that he didn’t really understand—this infuriated Halldór, and pushed him at times into political extremism [...] but in [*Independent People*] rage doesn’t win out; compassion does” (Brad Leithauser, personal communication, December 12, 2014). Laxness, a novelist of poetic depth and profound sympathy for humanity, clearly addresses timeless and universal themes in his novels that still deserve close inspection.

Despite Laxness’ impressive literary accomplishments and the applicability of his themes to the prevailing questions and struggles of modern life, contemporary criticism of his works geared toward an international audience is limited, confined to a few short volumes, essays and a comprehensive biography recently translated into English. In 1971, Rory McTurk, now a Emeritus Professor of Icelandic literature at the University of Leeds, translated and provided an introduction to Peter Hallberg’s retrospective of Laxness’ major works for the *Twayne World Authors Series*. A slim but useful volume, Hallberg’s contribution consists of a brief biographical overview and a series of critical essays about each of the Icelander’s most compelling and

controversial novels. Although Laxness was still active at the time, his career as a novelist was coming to a close. Works such as *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (Under the Glacier / Christianity at the Glacier, 1968) and *Innansveitarkronika* (A Parish Chronicle, 1970), regarded as equally important to understanding Laxness' literary philosophy and legacy, appeared too late or inclusion in Hallberg's overview.

In 2008, Halldór Guðmundsson's *The Islander: A Biography of Halldór Laxness*, translated by Philip Roughton, appeared in English translation, providing English speakers with the most thorough and authoritative Laxness biography to date. *The Islander* not only tells Laxness' incredible life story but also explains the historical and personal circumstances under which his novels were written; it does not purport to be a critical analysis of Laxness' writings, though. Similarly, Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, Professor of Icelandic at the University of Iceland, writes about the influence Laxness' books had on Icelandic society throughout the twentieth-century in Daisy Neijmann's collection of essays, *A History of Icelandic Literature*. Like the previously mentioned works, Jóhannsson's essays, though perceptive, insightful and written in English, are relatively brief and largely biographical and historical, not critical and analytical. A gaping void of contemporary English-language criticism on Laxness' works clearly exists, a void that is waiting to be filled.

But the question still remains: how does an author whose reputation was at its highest in the 1940s and early 50s undergo a revival in the twenty-first century? What steps should be taken to re-introduce his remarkable novels to the broader English-speaking public? Jane Smiley, who wrote a preface to the Vintage International edition of Laxness' *Brekkukotsannáll* (*The Fish Can Sing*, first published in Icelandic in 1957), acknowledges the challenges of bringing such an obscure author back into popular readership, but posited the following suggestions: "How a

given writer gets resurrected is a mystery—even Charles Dickens took a while to be resurrected after he died—sixty years or so. The American Scandinavian Foundation could sponsor a series of talks, or the Icelandic embassy could sponsor a conference. But the real key is finding readers [...]” (J. Smiley, personal communication, November 24, 2014). An international conference would certainly bring Laxness to the forefront of scholarly discourse, if only for a moment, and spark a vital, much-needed discussion about the future of Laxness studies in the twentieth-century. But Halldór Guðmundsson offers a broader and more hopeful vision for increasing readership and scholarship for Laxness:

The most important thing to do is to write about him in a controversial way. The only way authors survive is if they continue to be a subject of discussion. I think in a way Halldór Laxness realized that. He was always inviting toward scholars. He knew Peter Hallberg, and when I was writing about him, I visited him in his home, and he spent a whole afternoon telling me about his life. If you just look at the authors who are dead and still being talked about, then you realize that this is what it takes for an author’s works to live on. *Independent People* and *World Light* certainly have this strength to endure. I think there needs to be more people presenting papers about him at conferences, and as far as I can see, this is beginning to happen more and more. Brad Leithauser was also very helpful, turning things around with his essay about *Independent People*. Writing about him, and the availability of his books, are both important. (Guðmundsson, personal interview, November 18, 2014)

According to Guðmundsson, the key to preserving Laxness’ literature for future generations is a concerted effort on behalf of readers, scholars and researchers to write and publish bold new

perspectives on his work—an approach Laxness himself openly and willingly embraced. A relentless advocate for the survival of Laxness’ legacy, Brad Leithauser offers a more straightforward approach to encouraging others to read Laxness: “I’ve occasionally taught Laxness in my various classes [at Johns Hopkins University]. I wish more teachers would follow suit” (Leithauser, personal communication, December 12, 2014).

Halldór Laxness overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to become one of the most influential literary figures of the mid-twentieth century, carving a unique place for himself in the canon of Scandinavian literature. However, the turbulent political climate in the U.S. shortly after his novel’s American debut tarnished his reputation in the English-speaking world, adversely affecting his international readership for decades. Thanks in large part to the efforts of writer and Laxness enthusiast, Brad Leithauser, a series of Laxness’ greatest novels is now available in English, ready for scholarly examination and exploration. Due to the combined efforts of Laxness specialists and enthusiasts from Iceland and abroad, a renewal of international interest in the Nobel Prize winner’s writings appears to be just over the horizon, an exciting prospect for a small nation with a vibrant, long-standing literary tradition. Although Laxness died in 1998, his larger-than-life characters, his heart-rending stories about love and loss, and his compassionate depictions of humanity still speak to the hearts and minds of readers even to this day, perhaps making him one of the most overlooked and under-appreciated geniuses of our time.

The first chapter of this study examines the complex political forces, both Icelandic and foreign, behind Laxness’ disappearance from the American publishing market; the second chapter investigates a local controversy in Iceland surrounding Halldór Laxness and his contemporary Gunnar Gunnarsson, both of whom were nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1955;

the third chapter discusses and analyzes two film adaptations of Laxness' novels, both of which were created by Guðný Halldórsdóttir, one of Laxness' daughters; the fourth chapter is an exploration of the contemporary Icelandic literary scene. It contains interviews with a handful of Iceland's current leading literary voices and examines the legacy and influence Laxness still has over Icelandic letters, among other topics.

Some of these essays are strongly connected, while others are loosely related. However, the primary goal of this project is to provide bold new perspectives on Laxness' work and awaken new discussions about everything from his blacklisting in the U.S. to film adaptations of his novels. Furthermore, my aim is to help reassert and restore Laxness' rightful place in the canon of world literature, providing a much-needed critical reference for English speakers on the Iceland's fascinating life and ground-breaking body of work.

**Chapter One: Halldór Laxness vs. J. Edgar Hoover: How the U.S.
Government Stifled and Blacklisted English Translations of Laxness’
Literature during the Infamous Red Scare**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Halldór Laxness’ disappearance from the American book market in the 1940s had virtually nothing to do with his sales, or a lack of interest in Icelandic literature among English-speaking readers. Rather, the author’s socialist views and scathing public critiques of the controversial 1946 Keflavík Agreement made him the target of powerful, right-wing politicians during a time when conservative members of the U.S. Government were launching a veritable witch-hunt against prominent writers who, in any way, extolled leftist ideals. Until the late 1990s, Laxness’ disappearance from the American literary scene after his successful Book-of-the-Month club debut was shrouded in mystery. That was until Chay Lemoine, a curious professor at the University of South Illinois at Bloomington, uncovered through multiple Freedom of Information Act requests that U.S. Government pressure during the Red Scare likely caused publishers to shy away from translating and re-printing Laxness’ works in English. A temporary but damaging setback to Laxness’ literary reputation abroad, this blacklisting in the English-speaking world has become an unfortunate yet compelling piece of the writer’s legacy that speaks to the potency of his art and the power of his ideas.

In 1948, Laxness published *Atomstöðin* (*The Atom Station*), a novel that caused quite a stir on the Icelandic literary scene for its divisive political message, which voiced staunch opposition to the American military occupation of Iceland. The book tells the story of a young girl from Northern Iceland who moves to Reykjavík to work as a maid for a conservative member of parliament. Through sharp wit and satire, the novel subtly accuses Icelandic

politicians of colluding with the American government to “sell” the country for strategic military purposes at the height of World War II. The documentary *Anti-American Writer Wins ‘55 Nobel Prize*, which was produced by Halldór Þorgeirsson—the husband of Laxness’ youngest daughter Guðný—characterizes the novel’s incisive political message this way:

According to the book, the bones of the national poet Jónas Hallgrímsson were moved from Copenhagen only to distract the Icelanders from their government’s decision to join NATO. With this work, Halldór guaranteed himself the increased hostility of right wing politicians in Iceland, who felt that characters in the book bore a suspicious resemblance to certain political leaders, including themselves.

At that time, an agreement for the United States to provide monetary assistance to Iceland under the Marshall Plan was signed, even though Iceland met none of the requirements for such assistance.

In *The Atom Station*, Halldór Laxness indirectly scolds Iceland’s right-wing elite for what he perceived to be them acting outside of the young nation’s interests in exchange for money and ongoing economic assistance from the U.S. Government. He invokes the controversial 1946 exhumation and relocation of Iceland’s most revered national poet Jónas Hallgrímsson, who was a leading figure in Iceland’s push for independence, to excoriate these leaders for endangering the autonomy for which Icelanders fought so arduously. His boldness to take on not only Iceland’s conservative political establishment but also the encroaching influence of the U.S. stoked the ire of many in Iceland, fueling an already tense political discourse as well as civil unrest. Þorgeirsson’s documentary elucidates the uproar that *The Atom Station* caused.

According to the film, the slender but powerful book suggests that intimidation from the U.S.

might have played a crucial role in the decision-making of Iceland's leading parliamentary coalition at that time:

Halldór and other leftists argued that the officials had been coerced since the leasing of Iceland was vital to the Americans. A year later there were riots in Reykjavík after the Icelandic parliament approved Iceland's membership in NATO, which was established that year. This decision divided the nation, and a bitter Cold War began in Iceland, a dispute that would last for decades until the U.S. military packed its bags and went home.

Laxness' vociferous censure of America's contentious and hostile takeover of his homeland, coupled with his already well-known socialist views, eventually caught the attention of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and, later, the CIA at the height of the notorious Red Scare, according to the government documents Lemoine retrieved from the U.S. governmental agencies. In Þorgeirsson's documentary, this inquisitive English professor and Laxness enthusiast explains how the timing of Laxness' publication played a significant role in the author's eventual disappearance from the U.S. publishing market:

The Red Scare started after the War. Initially it was probably a way of delineating the ideologies of the period. The Soviets were becoming a world power. The United States was a world power. And there were people who were actually concerned that the Soviets would plant these moles in the United States Government and infiltrate the government and eventually take over from within. Mostly, it was a way of the right wing to brand anything least way to the left as something that was dangerous and something that needed to be stopped, nipped in the bud.

For Lemoine, Laxness' disappearance during the Red Scare seemed suspicious, like more than just happenstance, so he launched his own scholarly investigation into the matter, soliciting a series of documents from the FBI, the CIA, and the U.S. Department of State. The inquiries yielded surprising results:

During the late 90s, I decided to do research into Halldór Laxness and the possible blacklisting. I really did not have enough information at that period to say that he was without a doubt blacklisted. So I used something we call the Freedom of Information Act in the United States. I merely wrote to the FBI and asked them for any files on Halldór Laxness and, of course, they could neither confirm nor deny whether they had any files. Finally they said no, I appealed, and eventually they did send me the files which proved Hoover was involved in this.

As Lemoine kept digging for more information regarding Laxness' blacklisting, the U.S. Government showed increasing signs of hesitancy, denying certain information requests altogether or redacting large portions of the documents they released to him. In an article he wrote for *The Reykjavík Grapevine* entitled "Halldór Laxness and the CIA," Lemoine describes how bureaucrats began conveniently "misplacing" his requests, evading questions, and withholding information. The employee he spoke to from U.S. Department of State was particularly close-lipped toward his copious inquiries. He recounts some of his conversations with this employee:

I waited a few months and placed a call to the State Department official. I had his number and since we are on first name terms I decided that I would try to find out the status of my request. He returned my call and said that the office that handles these requests did not receive it. My request for the three missing pages was

“lost”. He did say that he would make sure that it received immediate attention. I waited a month and made another call. There was some action on my lost request. I was informed that the files in question were not FBI files, but files from another agency. That particular agency would make the determination if these files were to be released. I asked when this would happen and he said that was up to the other agency. I asked which Federal agency had jurisdiction over the files, but I was not allowed that information.

Based on the documents and information he received, Lemoine inferred that the unnamed agency was likely the CIA, which suggests that the U.S. Government was not only monitoring the content of the author’s novels from afar but also tracking the author in Iceland. Lemoine explains his reasoning for that conclusion further in his *Grapevine* article:

There are nine pages of observations that certainly could not have been made without a CIA presence in Iceland. If there was a CIA presence in Iceland and the FBI was very concerned just a year before about Iceland’s most famous citizen it would not take a leap of imagination to infer that the CIA was observing Halldór Laxness. The CIA has sent me a form letter saying they can “neither confirm nor deny” the existence of CIA files on Halldór Laxness. I will not speculate on what is in those files but I will speculate that they do exist.

Although the results of Lemoine’s investigation were somewhat inconclusive, it seems almost certain that Laxness’ opposition to the Keflavík Agreement elevated the writer to a national security threat in the United States, so much so that when “the case ended up on the desk of J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI and the CIA began spying on Halldór, keeping track of his movements over the next 25 years” (Lemoine, Halldór Laxness and the CIA, n. pg.). Because

Laxness' writings generated opposition to U.S. national interests in Iceland, thereby complicating U.S./Icelandic relations, circulation of his works in America ceased for decades. Lemoine notes in the documentary that conservative East Coast publishers, once they caught wind that Hoover was interested in Laxness, likely did not want to contend with the far-reaching hand of their powerful government. According to Lemoine's recovered documents, the notorious FBI director sought information about Laxness from these publishers, concerned that proceeds from his novels might be falling into the hands of Communist governments. Thus, Laxness became a victim of a contentious political climate sparked by the rise of the Soviet Union and the start of the Cold War.

The author's blacklisting in the U.S. was not only covert and paranoia-driven but also highly unusual. Traditionally, authors whose works are censored in the U.S. are banned for publishing obscene or pornographic material, like in the case of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, which was so controversial, so reviled, so incendiary that it required a U.S. Supreme Court case to assert and establish its artistic merits. Halldór Laxness' blacklisting was neither the result of widespread public outcry nor backlash over the content of his novels. He denounced the aggressive military actions of the U.S. out of a desire to preserve and protect his homeland's fragile and newly-formed independence. This patriotic stance potentially cost him years of exposure, royalties, and circulation on the American book market. However, in the twenty-first century, this blacklisting serves as yet another reason to revisit and reexamine the author's diverse and discerning body of work. An author of extraordinary vision and compassion for the common man, and a daring satirist with the boldness to challenge not only his fellow Icelanders but also the daunting U.S. Government, Laxness possessed rare courage as a writer, choosing truth over fame, valuing perspicacity over popularity and political correctness. The extent of the

CIA's tracking of Laxness may never be fully uncovered, nor the consequences of this tracking on the author's legacy and reputation ever fully known. But his art proved to be a powerful, subversive force in a raging debate over Iceland's future as a nation and its relationship with one of the most powerful countries in the world.

Chapter Two: A Fulbrighter's Journey to *Skriðuklaustur*: Exploring the Legacy of Halldór Laxness' Greatest Contemporary and Literary Rival

Gunnar Gunnarsson

Shortly after I arrived in Reykjavík in August 2013, I received an email in my school account calling for journalists to work for the student paper (*Stúdentablaðið*) at the University of Iceland. Because I didn't know a soul in Iceland at the time, I was actively seeking ways to become more involved in my new Icelandic community. Intrigued by the idea of working as a reporter in a foreign country, I decided to send in a resumé, hoping the editorial staff wanted to include an English section for foreign exchange students in the magazine that year. I typed up the email, pressed send, and waited for a couple weeks, until I received a positive reply from the paper's editor asking for a meeting. I happily agreed and met with him at the Student Council office a few days later.

During our discussion, he naturally asked what brought me, a young Texan with no obvious connection to the country, all the way to Iceland. When I explained to him that I was writing a book about twentieth-century Icelandic literature in tandem with taking Icelandic classes at the university, he took an interest in my story and thought I would be a good candidate for an interview with the *Morgunblaðið*, Iceland's oldest private newspaper (he had recently quit his job at *Monitor*, an spin-off of the paper geared toward younger audiences, to take on the editorship of *Stúdentablaðið*). Little did I know that this casual meeting would later send me on a frigid winter journey to East Iceland, where I would have the chance to delve deeply into the world of one of Halldór Laxness' greatest contemporaries, Gunnar Gunnarsson.

I was initially nervous about the prospect of being interviewed by a national news outlet, but I gladly assented. Within a few weeks, he put me in contact with a journalist from the paper, who agreed to speak with me over the phone. I will never forget tremulously answering her questions about my studies and my book project as I paced furiously around my tiny dorm room. I recall briefly mentioning Gunnar Gunnarsson's name during our conversation, as I had read some of his lesser-known novels and wanted to learn more about his friendship and professional relationship with Laxness.

When the article appeared on the front page of a Sunday edition in early November of 2013, the journalist, to my surprise, included this tidbit about Gunnarsson from the interview in the piece. A couple days after the article debuted, I logged onto my facebook account and noticed that I had received a message from someone who had not yet added me as a friend, an unusual occurrence for me. The author wrote in Icelandic and identified himself as the director of *Skriðuklaustur*, a museum and cultural center in Egilsstaðir established at Gunnarsson's former estate. He wanted to speak to me about my project and invited me to do a research residency at the museum at some point during my stay in Iceland. Elated, I glanced over my calendar and determined that a mid-December journey would be the most feasible option for me. I then booked a roundtrip plane flight from Reykjavík to Egilsstaðir, not quite knowing what to expect or where this unanticipated journey might lead. In hindsight, this four-day research residency not only imparted me with meaningful insight into Gunnarsson's body of work but also revealed another fascinating, lesser-known chapter of Halldór Laxness' legacy—the great hurdles he had to overcome, both in Iceland and abroad, in order to secure his Nobel Prize in 1955. In addition to his blacklisting in the U.S., Halldór Laxness had to edge out his most revered Icelandic

contemporary, Gunnar Gunnarsson, a respected modernist author and writer of pastoral fiction, who had also been nominated for the prestigious honor numerous times.

Who exactly was Gunnar Gunnarsson, and what made him such a formidable contender for the world's most coveted literary honor? The son of impoverished Icelandic farmers, Gunnar Gunnarsson emerged from a life of destitution to become one of Europe's most talked about novelists in Danish during the early twentieth century. He moved to Denmark in 1907 to acquire an education, a decision that ultimately allowed him to fulfill his ambition of living off his writing. However, Gunnarsson's literary career is not a glamorous rags-to-riches tale, or a story of a talented Icelandic farm boy's meteoric rise to fame. Through many years of adversity, and even starvation, he mastered the Danish language and published some of the most captivating novels of his time, garnering at least four Nobel Prize nominations from the Swedish linguist Adolf Noreen along the way, among others (The Nobel Foundation). Although his books are now out of print in English, Gunnarsson's prolific literary output and diverse canon of stories has made an indelible imprint on both Icelandic and Danish letters.

Gunnarsson's bibliography, which consists of more than 40 novels, short stories, and translations, demonstrates tremendous innovation and admirable diversity. His novel *Gest de enøjede* (*Guest the One-Eyed*, 1913) became the first book published by an Icelander to be adapted to film, giving him widespread renown. However, as he basked in the success of his first great novel, a tempest of international conflict brewed on the horizon. The horrors and uncertainties of World War I temporarily dampened Gunnarsson's spirits. This cynical outlook is illustrated in his most critically-acclaimed novel *Salige er de enfoldige* (*Seven Days' Darkness*, 1920), which details an Icelandic doctor's gradual descent into madness. After the storms of the war subsided, Gunnarsson's writing took a vastly different turn, focusing on religious narratives,

such as *Advent (The Good Shepherd)*, and his autobiography, which was published in five volumes from 1923-1928. *Svartfugl (The Black Cliffs)*, written in 1929, is an intricately-woven mystery about the prosecution of a notorious double murder in Iceland, and a parish priest's inner struggle to arrive at a truthful verdict. Gunnarsson executes this range of stories with psychological depth and a keen understanding of the human heart, which made him a critical and popular success worldwide.

Perhaps none of Gunnarsson's books has received more adulation from audiences than *The Good Shepherd*. On the surface, this advent tale is an endearing Christian allegory about an Icelandic shepherd's selfless love for his sheep. However, upon close scrutiny, it also champions the universal values of friendship, loyalty, and charity. The story follows Benedikt, a gentle shepherder, as he embarks on his annual journey through the lowery mountain passes of Iceland to save sheep that strayed from his neighbors' flocks during the grazing season. He braves the bleak, snow-laden landscape, not for profit, not for gratitude or praise from the townsfolk, but simply to rescue the forsaken, to remember the forgotten. Accompanied by his loyal dog Leo and his stalwart ram Gnarly, Benedikt risks everything to perform this simple act of mercy. The sincerity of Benedikt's altruistic resolve, though idealistic, embodies a philosophy of compassion and charity toward all of God's creatures, making it an ideal Christmas story that is still widely read and cherished in Iceland to this day.

In *Seven Days' Darkness*, Gunnar Gunnarsson, who resided in Denmark during World War I, offers a bleak depiction of the psychological injuries this war inflicted on Icelanders and mainland Europeans. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson explains that *Seven Days' Darkness* is a story "of a genesis reversed...where the world of the eminent doctor Grímur Elliðagrímur collapses bit by bit in the course of seven days...", and "his fall is triggered by a battle of wits and beliefs with an

old acquaintance, the nihilist philosopher Páll Einarsson” (361). A nearby volcano erupts, shrouding Reykjavík in ash and darkness, setting the stage whereon the gloomy psychological drama between these two Icelanders takes place. Grímur, whose “one ambition is to succor wretched humanity” (Gunnarsson 23), overextends himself as one of Reykjavík’s only doctors during the Spanish flu epidemic, which ravaged the nation’s capital in 1918. Physically and mentally exhausted, the physician falls prey to his rival Páll Einarsson’s inexplicably vicious attempts to undermine his trust in his wife, Vigdis. Vigdis is a compassionate woman, who encourages and upholds Grímur’s faith in humanity. But her unusual affection for and unexplained past with Páll Einarsson awakens suspicion of infidelity within Grímur. Their relationship gradually deteriorates, and the novel culminates with Grímur walking in on the two during an innocent, but unanticipated, late-night visit. His shattered trust in Vigdis, coupled with his overwhelming fatigue, sends him spiraling into madness. Jóhannsson offers this assessment to explain the cause of Grímur’s psychological disintegration:

Páll has lost faith in good and evil and has substituted for these concepts those of the strong and the weak. The weak are those who have faith in something, be it God, morality, or simply the goodness of others. Their faith, according to Páll, makes them dependent on something other than themselves, and when that is taken away from them, their weakness reveals itself, a philosophical stance quite obviously based on the contemporary reading of Nietzsche and his theories of the superman (Jóhannsson 362).

Jóhannsson further asserts that *Seven Days’ Darkness* “confirms the collapse of moral as well as religious values” (362) during the early 1900s, that Grímur’s demise signals a broader dissolution of faith in both our fellow man and in God. Gunnarsson’s feelings on the war are

perhaps even more poignantly articulated in his 1915 existential novel *Livets Strand*, or in English translation, *The Shore of Life*:

I did not bleed on the outside; neither cuts nor bruises could be found on my body...no, the insane frenzy of war inflicted wounds of another nature on me. My soul resembled burned soil, defiled with foul heaps of corpses; each emptied field reminded me of ground ploughed with gunfire, polluted by freshly mutilated human bodies. I bleed on the inside” (Jóhannsson 349-350).

Like Laxness, Gunnarsson’s novels serve as a chronicle not only of the Icelandic consciousness but also of the entire human condition during the first half of the twentieth-century, possessing a distinctively universal message, despite the books’ often provincial settings. There are currently no English translations of his works in circulation, a consequence of time and the author’s cozy publishing relationship with Germany during the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime.

Whereas Laxness’ novels were banned in Germany during World War II for their outspoken leftist views, Gunnarsson’s pastoral narratives and quaint allegorical tales flourished there.

Similar to the Norwegian Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun, Gunnarsson’s failure to castigate and condemn the aggressive and vile actions of fascist Germany forever threw his legacy and artistic merits into contention abroad, and interest in his work in the English-speaking world gradually faded.

Naturally, I arrived in Egilsstaðir with many questions about Gunnarsson, wondering just how close he ever came to winning the Nobel Prize and to what extent his relationship with Nazi Germany marred his reputation in Iceland. I remember walking across the tarmac at the airport in East Iceland, tired, cold, and bleary-eyed, with the slightly-embarrassing floral-print rolling suitcase I inherited from my parents in tow. The museum director, who recognized me from my

newspaper photo, greeted me in the airport lobby, helped me load my belongings into the trunk of his car, and dropped me off at a *Nettó* grocery store for an hour to let me stock up on food for my stay. I grabbed a cart, threw in every necessity I could think of, and texted the director for pick-up when I was finished. As I waited for him, I gazed out the storefront window into the pitch-black darkness of winter (East Iceland boasts only about four hours of faint sunlight in December)—to this day, I still joke that I’ve been to Egilsstaðir, and enjoyed my stay there, but have no idea what the town actually looks like! The director picked me up again and we drove for about thirty minutes outside of town. When we arrived at *Skriðuklaustur*, he showed me the guest bedroom, the kitchen, and gave me a brief tour of the museum, before leaving me to settle in. The next morning he stopped by and brought me several binders full of old documents about Gunnarsson in English, Swedish, Danish, and Icelandic. Then the real fun began.

I got to work the next morning, sifting through these antique papers, which included everything from correspondence between Gunnarsson and his publishers to Nobel Prize nomination letters to newspaper clippings describing the author’s literary accomplishments. I spent hours reading through numerous laudatory reviews of *The Good Shepherd* and Gunnarsson’s autobiography *The Church on the Mountain*. The reviewers unanimously praised Gunnarsson’s ability to provide American readers with a compelling glimpse into a rapidly-vanishing way of agrarian life, in a country that is so distant, so unfamiliar, to the rest of the world. Gunnarsson, like Laxness, found tremendous success in the United States through the Book-of-the-Month Club, his novels selling thousands of copies. The documents showed how Lutheran ministers in the U.S. wrote to each other about *The Good Shepherd*, praising its literary qualities, as well as its poignant Christian message. They loved the book so much that they would recommend the quaint advent story to their congregations during Sunday sermons.

While the newspaper articles and correspondence gave me a clearer understanding of why Gunnarsson was so popular during the early 1900s, I found the 1955 Nobel Prize nomination letters from various professors and writers associations particularly fascinating. Rumors started early that year that the Swedish Academy would be awarding the prize to an Icelander out of reverence and respect for the island nation's tremendous contributions to world literature through the Icelandic sagas. Academics and other prognosticators frequently named Gunnarsson and Laxness as the top contenders, citing their massive readership, literary merits, and respect for this ancient saga tradition. Stellan Arvidson, the head of the Swedish Writers Association, proposed that the prize be split between the two authors, explaining that both writers, though philosophically distinct from one another, write in the same spirit and tradition. I translated the nomination letter, which was sent to the Swedish Academy on January 27, 1955, from the Swedish with the help of a dormmate, who was fluent in the language:

To the Swedish Academy,

In my capacity as chairman of the Swedish Writers Association and with the unanimous consent of the board, who discussed the matter in a meeting today, I hereby recommend that the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1955 be jointly awarded to the Icelandic authors Gunnar Gunnarsson and Halldór Kiljan Laxness.

Both authors are superb representatives of the Icelandic literary tradition, which is, thanks to them, now experiencing an unusual prosperity. The elder of them, Gunnarsson, born in 1889, gained his global reputation in the 1920s, while the younger, Laxness, born in 1902, is currently at the height of his fame. Gunnarsson is the most innovative Icelandic epicist of modern times, Laxness is his disciple and, to some degree, his literary successor. Both have planted their roots in the

Icelandic saga tradition, both are portrayers of Icelandic life throughout the centuries, and both are deeply involved in Icelandic society and cultural life today. Despite these similarities, they are opposites. Gunnarsson's view of society is democratic and conservative, while Laxness' is democratic and radical. Gunnarsson is heavier and more profound, Laxness is more versatile and visionary. Together they represent modern Iceland, with its contradictions, while also symbolizing a deep unity of vision for mankind and ideal life.

Objectively speaking, it is, in my opinion, not an ideal arrangement to split a Nobel Prize. In this case, however, it seems justified. Icelandic literature should not go unrecognized any longer. Awarding the Nobel Prize to one of these great poets over the other would seem unfair. Unless the Academy chooses to award both authors the prize sequentially, a sharing of the award appears to be the appropriate solution. The prize would in this way become an award to a literature that is currently experiencing a blossoming of worldwide literary significance.

Stellan Arvidson

As this letter demonstrates, Gunnarsson and Laxness were seemingly on a trajectory toward a joint Nobel win, but a legend exists in Iceland that the Swedish Academy changed its mind at the last minute, deciding to honor Laxness exclusively. The legend claims that on the night before the 1955 Nobel Prize was announced, Gunnarsson received a telegraph from one of his publishers, informing him that they had received word that a Nobel win was imminent. The telegraph has since been lost, rendering the story interesting but completely unverifiable. So what influenced the Nobel committee's eventual decision to honor only Laxness "for his vivid

epic power which has renewed the great narrative art of Iceland” (nobelprize.org)? The reasoning behind the decision will likely never be known, forever leaving literary scholars to speculate.

Although Gunnarsson’s worldwide acclaim was eventually overshadowed by Laxness’ unprecedented Nobel win, a deep appreciation for his novels persists in Iceland. For example, during my stay at *Skriðuklaustur*, the museum director invited me to attend an advent reading of *The Good Shepherd*, a tradition that takes place in Gunnarsson’s office every year around Christmastime. I joined a small group of Icelanders from Egilsstaðir as they huddled together in the cozy room, which was warmed by a crackling fire. We listened intently as a bespectacled woman with brassy red hair sat in the green-cushioned chair behind Gunnarsson’s old writing desk, reading the author’s words in flawless, measured Icelandic. The guests remained attentive throughout the reading, as did I, and their appreciation for the novel was obvious in their astute faces. The director informed me afterward that people all over the world gather in a similar fashion to read this short novel around Christmastime, a testament to the author’s enduring message.

After my four-day visit was done, I left *Skriðuklaustur* with a renewed understanding of Gunnarsson’s legacy and a deeper appreciation for Laxness’ literary achievements. While Gunnarsson no longer stands as tall on the world stage, his novels, and the vanishing world they depict, serve as a time capsule of the early twentieth century, with all of its uncertainty and political turbulence. As the museum director drove me to the airport in Egilsstaðir, he explained that he felt confident that Gunnarsson’s novels would one day return to print in English translation, as international interest in Icelandic culture continues to grow. But, for now, the author remains one of Iceland’s most controversial and beloved poets, a towering figure who once rivalled the great Halldór Laxness.

**Chapter Three: Family Ties and the Adaptation Process: An Analysis of
Guðný Halldórsdóttir's Film Adaptations of *Ungfrúin Góða og Húsið* and
*Kristnihald Undir Jökli***

Guðný Halldórsdóttir is a respected Icelandic filmmaker and the youngest daughter of Halldór Laxness. After studying at the London International Film School under the tutelage of Gerald Wilson, she founded her own production company in Iceland called UMBI Film, writing scripts for various projects and producing seven movies in total, two of which are adaptations of her father's novels. Her adaptation of the novella *Ungfrúin Góða og Húsið* (1999), which depicts life in Iceland during the early twentieth century, tells the tragic story of Rannveig. Rannveig is an unwed woman in her mid-thirties who causes a scandal within her community by defying her parents' wishes for her to marry and travelling to Denmark to study needlework instead, only to return pregnant, unmarried and disgraced. The pain and destruction the scandal causes her wealthy family only intensifies when Rannveig's sister, the manipulative þuríður, discretely gives the child away to an orphanage in Denmark in order to preserve the family's social standing. This betrayal ravages the sisters' relationship, embittering them both.

Based on the novel of the same name, *Kristnihald Undir Jökli* (1989) is an absurd comedy about an aspiring priest who is sent to Snæfellsnes to investigate the dwindling faith of both the local pastor and the community he shepherds. Shortly after his arrival, the hapless bishop's emissary meets the pastor Jón Primus, an eccentric man who has relinquished his Christian faith and his responsibilities to the church in favor of glorifying the natural world. While adaptations of literary works are frequently panned as "carnalizations" (Elliott 167) of their source material, Guðný's adaptations of her father's novels manage to strike up an ideal

balance between maintaining the director's unique interpretive vision while remaining almost scrupulously faithful to the original work—not an easy feat by any measure. Guðný's effective transference of her father's prose to film deserves further analysis, especially as critics and scholars begin to pay more analytical attention to the process of adaptation, which still remains largely unexplained and unexplored.

A nascent field of research that “lags deplorably behind the critical times” (Elliott 133), adaptation studies seeks to articulate the nature of and motivation behind intermediality—the translation of a piece of art from one medium to another. Although adaptations of texts into film are ubiquitous, pervading nearly every aspect of twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture, little is understood about what film adaptations actually are in essence, or why the compulsion to create them exists. Adaptations of short stories like *Ungrúin Góða og Húsið* in particular serve to “extend, enhance, and elaborate on their sources” (Harrison xxi), but what drives the human compulsion to incarnate the written word into more concrete visual forms in the first place? The ubiquity of adaptations is particularly perplexing, given the fact that the printed word is so often revered, viewed as one of the highest forms of art, while film adaptations are often derided, viewed as unfaithful to the text and disappointingly inadequate. Kamilla Elliott describes adaptations as “the bad boy” of “interart criticism” because they have been “decreed inartistic art for over a century now...because [they] blur categorizations of the arts, muddying their virginal purity” (133). Indeed, adaptations are difficult to classify, but films like Guðný's *Ungrúin Góða og Húsið* and *Kristnihald Undir Jökli*, with their relatable characters, beautiful cinematography and emotional resonance with audiences, cannot be equated to cheap imitations of their source material, with the same artistic value as poster replicas of the Mona Lisa. According to statistics published in 1992, “85 percent of all Oscar-winning Best Pictures” were

“adaptations,” and 95 percent of award-winning miniseries are adapted from literary works (Hutcheon 4). The goal of this analysis is to shed light on the pervasive nature of adaptations and to analyze how Guðný establishes such a fruitful relationship/dialogue between the source material (Laxness’ novels) and her film adaptations. Using adaptation theory and personal interviews with Guðný, this essay also seeks to understand and analyze how a close family member approaches the process of adapting a relative’s novels to film.

While many directors purposefully and necessarily deviate from the original text when modifying a story for the big screen, Guðný’s adaptations of Halldór Laxness’ novels are characterized by a close adherence to the original storylines, with only minor variations in the sequence of events and the addition of a few scenes that stray from descriptions within the story. In a personal interview, Guðný explains how her relationship with her father in many ways compelled her to remain faithful to the source material, while also giving her a deeper understanding of the novels’ themes and characters:

I was very faithful to the stories. I would, of course, talk to my father about these stories before I adapted them. They inspired me as they are, and I had nothing to add to them, so I was as faithful as one can be to the work when a film-maker decides to do an adaptation of an author’s books. My father and I talked often about *Kristnihald Undir Jökli. Ungfrúin Góða og Húsið* was easier to adapt, and we went on many walks and talked about that story together quite frequently. He would always tell me about the triangles within the books because, really, both films are about triangles. There are always three people within the relationships. (Halldórsdóttir)

In addition to giving her unique insight with regards to the author's intent, Guðný's blood relationship to Halldór Laxness also influenced which of his novels she decided to translate to film: "I decided not to tackle his biggest books, because they are so well-known in Iceland, and I didn't want to damage the ideas of the readers" (Halldórsdóttir). As Guðný's words suggest, being related to the author, especially one who is still alive at the time of the film's production, certainly influenced which stories she adapted and how she adapted them. This familial bond can spark a strong desire to remain faithful to the source material, to do it justice, so as to preserve and respect the imagination of the readers and the vision of the author. Although most film directors in Iceland would hesitate to tackle Halldór Laxness's epic novels *Independent People*, *World Light*, or *Salka Valka*, Guðný makes it clear that her relationship to the Nobel winner instilled a strong sense of veneration within her, ultimately determining which adaptations she chose to execute.

Guðný skillfully articulates the reasoning behind why she chose to adapt particular novels from her father's canon, but what necessitates or motivates the creation of adaptations in the first place? In her article "Literary Cinema and the Form/Content Debate," Kamilla Elliott describes the incarnational concept of adaptation, the idea that words are "only a partial expression of a more total representation that requires incarnation for [their] fulfillment" (161). This theory suggests that adaptations of novels through film or other visual media serve to satisfy an audience's fundamental desire to see "words that merely hint at sight, sound, touch and smell" come to life in more "phenomenological forms" (161). According to this concept, a literary work—and the characters, landscapes, and stories described within it—requires some form of intermediality to achieve true "realization," which scholar Martin Meisel defines as a "literal re-creation...that is [a] more vivid, visual, physically present medium" (162). This theory has

profound implications for not only the field of adaptation studies but also for the entire field of literary studies, as it renders the written word inadequate, somehow “less real” than visual representations, and insinuates that visual media are superior or exceptional forms of artistic expression.

However, incarnation theory seemingly downplays the fact that most adaptations of novels are viewed by critics and audiences alike as a “carnalization” of the source material that corrupts the “spiritual and transcendental signification...of a romanticized ‘divine’ imagination” (167). A film adaptation of a beloved short story or novel can at its best pay homage to the original work by being true to its spirit; the film version is seldom—if ever—viewed as superior to its source material. Elliott characterizes this peculiarity in the following way: “Adaptation often appears as sacrilege against the word” (166).

Elliott’s analysis of incarnational theory does, however, provide a credible explanation as to why books rarely translate into satisfying films. Elliott explains this phenomenon using the adaptation of scenes of violence from novels as an example:

Incarnation calls the bluff of subjective linguistic mitigations of objective enacted social actions. By showing the violent subject objectively engaged in violent deeds rather than absorbed in lofty rationalizations and poetic psychologizings of them, incarnation reveals not only the objective horrors of violent deeds that language masks, but also the ethical horror that language can deftly mitigate egregious social actions. (168)

Language, according to Elliott, often mitigates the harsh actions described in novels in a way that film adaptations cannot. In William Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies*, for example, the primitive, violent actions of a group of young boys stranded on a deserted island seem

understandable, given the author's lengthy descriptions of the boys' thoughts, feelings and openly-expressed motivations. However, when these same violent acts are objectively depicted on film, they appear grotesque, brutal, and completely unsympathetic. Thus, language offers deeper insight into the characters' psychology and actions in a way that films cannot, explaining why the written word so rarely translates successfully and satisfyingly into film. Though insufficient in many respects, the incarnational concept of adaptation not only posits interesting theories about why humans feel the need to create adaptations but also elucidates the mitigating power of language, shedding light on the tenuous and complex relationship between textual sources and their visual realizations.

The critical success of Guðný's *Ungrúin Góða og Húsið* and *Kristnihald Undir Jökli* certainly transcends the "sacrilege" criticism described in Elliott's incarnational theory of adaptation, for the film adaptations were widely praised for establishing a fruitful relationship with their source material, complementing it instead of overshadowing it. The events described within the stories become in many ways even more powerful once the mitigating effects of the written word are stripped away using cinematography, making viewers feel as though they are witnessing the familial drama of *Ungrúin Góða og Húsið* firsthand and entering the bizarre world of *Kristnihald Undir Jökli* themselves. Based on these observations, there seems to be an appropriate balance between fidelity and creativity that must be struck in order for a film adaptation to be acceptable to audiences. The film itself must, first and foremost, be coherent and successful *as a film*, regardless of the textual source from which it originated. As Stephanie Harrison points out "a film shouldn't need to spring fully formed from a writer/director's loins in order to be deemed good. Nor should an adaptation be tethered too tightly to its source" (xviii). Both of Guðný's adaptations certainly pay homage to their source material, so is there a

particular reason why these two stories transpose so well to the silver screen? In the case of *Ungfrúin Góða og Húsið*, it's possible that the act of converting lesser-known, well-crafted short story to the screen is a better predictor of critical adoration and audience reception: "For this reason, films adapted from excellent, but lesser-known tales have often been better received...here, the short story has a distinct advantage over the novel: few short stories are embedded in the public's consciousness in the way that popular novels often are" (Harrison xvi). Thus, it's fair to assume that because *Ungfrúin Góða og Húsið* was adapted from a short story, one that was written quite early in Laxness' career—before he was famous—it largely avoided the critical pitfalls great novels typically face when adapted to the screen. In this instance, the movie introduced the short story to the international community instead of the other way around, which proved advantageous. Written after Laxness took a six year hiatus from composing novels, and published well after the media blitz of his Nobel win faded away, *Kristnihald Undir Jökli* largely evaded this common scrutiny as well, allowing the movie to be evaluated more as a self-standing film than as an adaptation. The form of the original novel may have also contributed to its successful transference. Guðný notes that "*Kristnihald Undir Jökli* adapted quite easily because the novel is written like a play" (Halldórsdóttir), a fact that certainly would have made the novel more conducive to screen adaption.

Despite her expressed desire to remain as faithful to her father's words as possible, Guðný admits that she had to add scenes, craft dialogue, and take a few creative liberties while transferring her father's words into film. While both movies were in their production stage, Guðný recalls having many conversations with her father during which he gave her permission to take these necessary freedoms with the tales: "When I was filming *Ungfrúin Góða og Húsið*, especially, he said that although he wrote this novella, the reader could also write it out for him,

so I chose to take everything that was in between the lines of the book and put it on the surface of the film” (Halldórsdóttir). However, her insights and closeness to the author did not simplify the process of adaptation; she still had to extrapolate, interpret, and edit the source material in order to transform it into successful cinema:

I definitely had to add scenes when making the film, scenes which are “lying in the air,” so to speak. These scenes often had to condense what was said in a several pages, like these triangles in *Kristnihald Undir Jökli*—there is this Baptist triangle, a hippy triangle, and so on. I had to put in signs, things the books tell you, but I, as a film-maker, had to depict visually. This was especially true for *Ungfrúin Góða og Húsið*. There is very little text in it. The story is told by women workers in the village, in the third person, and there are few sentences, which meant that I had to make up sentences that were written in that language from one hundred years ago. I put everything on the surface, made it more straightforward. In the case of Rannveig and Þuríður, I included sex scenes to depict the affairs they had with Viggó in Denmark, instead of just implying them like the book does. I find you have to be more straightforward in film. Maybe you can tell a love story in between the lines for six pages in a novel, but in a film you have to depict it quickly because you are limited for time. (Halldórsdóttir)

As shown, film adaptation, especially of a shorter novel, necessitates extension, elaboration, and clarification. Transferring content from one artistic medium to another does not occur seamlessly, for the conventions of film and literature are quite different. Guðný certainly grappled with this incompatibility between text and cinema while tackling her adaptations of her

father's novels. She attests that the length of the original text does affect how easy it is to adapt, claiming that *Ungfrúin Góða og Húsið*, a concise novella, was far simpler to convert to film:

It's easier to adapt a shorter novel in that you don't have to throw so much away from the original writer. It gives you more freedom with the filmmaking, with the script, and with short stories. If you have a whole fat book, there are so many things you have to leave out. Even though it's only a hundred pages, a director could easily expand *Ungfrúin Góða og Húsið* into 12 episodes for television. I think it's easier to adapt a shorter novel, because you don't have to kill too many ideas from the original author. I had to leave a lot out of *Kristnihald Undir Jökli*. I did the script in collaboration with Gerald Wilson, my mentor from college, who did lots of films in the 80s. He had the idea to frame the beginning of *Kristnihald Undir Jökli* around one scene. During this scene a group of bishops are having a meeting in Reykjavík, debating how they are going to make faith more alive, more real, at Snæfellsnes, and how they are going to deal with this priest out in the West, an evangelist priest who has given up the faith, taken an interest in more worldly things. The bishop of Iceland comes to this meeting, and he sends this young emissary west to find out what's happening at this parish. This meeting scene begins and closes out the film. When the emissary gets to Snæfellsnes, of course, he finds the church run down, and the pastor refuses to work for the church, because he's always thinking about the glacier, the stones, the birds, everything but what he's supposed to. (Halldórsdóttir)

Despite being related to the original author, Guðný encountered the same problems many directors experience when adapting a literary work to film: the incompatibility between artistic

media, the need to extend and edit the source material, and the struggle to balance fidelity with originality. Through collaboration with her mentor and careful artistic decision-making, she was able to find workable solutions to these problems, producing films that are not only true to the spirit of her father's works but also that stand alone as engaging works of cinema.

Two skillful transferences of text into film, Guðný Halldórsdóttir's *Ungrúin Góða og Húsið* and *Kristnihald Undir Jökli* fulfill what audiences have come to expect from adaptations; the movies remain faithful to the original works, while throwing in the occasional surprise and deviation from the text in order to keep them engaged. By achieving this balance, the director evades the common criticism that adaptations represent mere "carnalizations" of their source material, managing to take creative license where necessary without desecrating the artistry of the original stories. Using stunning cinematography, great scripts, and casts of talented actors/actresses, Guðný artfully communicates the feelings and actions of the characters and stories in a way that incarnates her father's words, instead of upending or usurping them. She chose to adapt several relatively unknown stories from her father's extensive canon, which likely gave her more freedom to realize her vision/interpretation of the sources. Guðný undoubtedly fills in gaps the stories leave in order to improve the overall coherence of the films but, in doing so, amplifies crucial themes and messages already embedded in both novels. Seeing these timeless tales adapted to the screen serves to perpetuate not only the stories themselves but also the themes contained within them for future generations, showing how adaptations are a means through which stories evolve and survive. Thus, Guðný's adaptations stand not only as great achievements in Icelandic film but also as great teaching tools that help us better understand the nature of both intermediality, the success of film adaptations, and her father's writings.

Chapter Four: The Inheritors: Interviewing the Successors to Halldór

Laxness' Literary Legacy

In his presentation speech at the 1955 Nobel award ceremony, Elias Wessén of the Swedish Academy commended Halldór Laxness for giving his fellow Icelandic writers the “courage to use their native tongue,” noting that “therein lies his greatest significance, and this is what has given him a strong and very respected position in his own land” (nobelprize.org). Icelandic, a language spoken by roughly 330,000 people worldwide, has enjoyed a veritable Renaissance ever since Laxness clinched his Nobel Prize over sixty years ago. The small island nation of Iceland now boasts a thriving literary scene, with hundreds of active professional writers, each with their own distinct voice and literary identity. And most of them write exclusively in Icelandic! Iceland’s love for literature led to its capital city Reykjavík being named a UNESCO City of Literature in 2011, and every year around Christmastime, Icelanders celebrate the *jólabókaflóð* (Christmas Book Flood), an exciting time when Icelandic publishers release a deluge of new titles on the book market. This nationwide respect and appreciation for literature is, in many ways, a product of Laxness’ legacy, so I wanted to dive deeper into the contemporary Icelandic literary scene to find out what it’s like to be a writer in this fascinating land of letters. The following are interviews I conducted in 2014 with some of Iceland’s most beloved and influential writers. During the interviews, I asked a variety of questions about their influences, their motivation for writing, their most recent projects, and Iceland’s current voice in the dialogue of world literature. Each author provided unique insight as to what it’s like writing in a minority language, and some describe what it’s like writing in the shadow of Iceland’s only Nobel laureate to date. Some of the interviews have been edited slightly for concision and

clarity, but it was my sincere desire to let each other's unique perspective shine through. What emerges from these conversations is a portrait of a country rife with literary geniuses and innovative thinkers, who have a lot to say about literature's important role not only in Iceland but also in the world today.

Sjón is an Academy Award-nominated writer, poet, and lyricist, who received the 2005 Nordic Council Literature Prize for his novel *The Blue Fox*. He has written song lyrics for Björk, and his numerous novels and poems have been translated into over 35 languages. He lives in Reykjavík.

E: Sjón, why do you write?

S: My answer to that question goes something like this: one of the things you're trying to discover as you're writing is why you're doing it. We don't know where the urge to write comes from. It comes, perhaps, from having a strong literary influence at a young age. I was a very talkative child, and I read a lot. I learned to read quite fast and have been a voracious reader from the beginning. I read everything I could lay my eyes on. In my case, it was a combination of my interest in the Icelandic folk poems and my interest in poetry. I wanted to return the favor as a reader, so I started writing. Then, one day, all of a sudden, I become hooked on writing. If I don't write, I develop withdrawal symptoms. That's not to say that I'm an author who writes every day. There are months and months when I don't do any serious writing at all, perhaps some commissions here and there. I don't write because I have a social agenda, but at the same time I'm aware of the social factors at work. I'm very much aware of the literary work as a social and political act, but always on its own terms. The poem, for example, is a political act on its own. Just the act of writing a poem is a very strong social act. You can find many reasons for why you

write, but in the end, you have to find your own reasons. There are plenty of reasons not to write, especially in a small society like Iceland.

E: What role do you believe Iceland currently plays in the international literary scene? What is unique about contemporary Icelandic literature, in your view?

S: At the moment, Iceland's only real claim to a seat at the table of world literature is the Icelandic sagas and, maybe, Halldór Laxness. I think these incredible works of literature are really our only real reason for our seat at that table. We can also claim that we have our own Nobel Prize winner. The Dutch/Flemish culture, for example, has not yet produced a Nobel Prize winner. We have the sagas and Halldór Laxness, so why not take a look? This heritage is a burden in that we need to be able to claim our place as contemporary authors. But a Spaniard can never escape *Don Quixote* and an Italian author can never escape Dante, for example. We tend to divide the world into literary centers, for example the "Latin-American novel." We can claim the sagas more or less for ourselves. They are the foundation of Nordic literature. We have to see Icelandic literature as a part of Nordic literature, simply because of our shared heritage, which is the sagas. We share much history, not only political history but also intellectual history. Icelanders were educated in Denmark. Later on, the Reformation happened, and then we shared intellectual history. We have to associate Icelandic literature with Nordic history, but we are distinguished by the sagas. The Icelandic sagas bring together awareness of form, story-telling, and content that speaks to social issues. And that is part of what the Reformation brought; it brought attention to the individual, the struggling individual. There is a very strong tradition in Nordic literature to look at the plight of the poor and the social outcasts. These are all small countries with strong rural culture. Because of the strong literary connections of these countries, one starts to see stories emerging very quickly in Nordic literature. I think the theme of the

individual versus society is very strong in Nordic literature. We write in a language spoken by very few. We are lucky that our literature has developed along with what's going on in literature abroad. I think that's why we've been able to reinvent Icelandic literature over and over again, and that's why it's still thriving to this day. Hallgrímur Pétursson, for example, was influenced by German poets. Halldór Laxness was influenced by Communists. Icelanders are always bringing ideas back from abroad, without caring about the politics behind these ideas.

E: In your opinion, what is the most important piece of Icelandic literature written in the last decade? In the last century?

S: I think my own books are quite unique and have never been done before in Icelandic literature. I've found a new way of dealing with Icelandic history as a subject and dealing with old texts. My novel *From the Mouth of the Whale* is a very special book in Icelandic literature, because I use stream of consciousness to bring the lost world of the 17th century to life. I really used the literary tools of the avante garde to have an active dialogue with that lost world. The most important book of the twentieth-century, in my view, was *The Fish Can Sing* by Halldór Laxness. I taught a course in a university in Berlin. I've studied it quite well, and I think it is an amazing work as well. One of the reasons I name it is that it's really Halldór's attempt at understanding how a tiny society like Reykjavík, like Iceland, was able to produce a world talent in the arts. In that book, it's a young boy who sings, and Halldór is trying to discuss how Iceland can produce a world class artist. It's an amazing exploration of how culture is always based on the dialogue between the local and the global. It's really an example of what I call this "small world literature" way of writing because he chooses as a platform for the novel this tiny city of Reykjavík, and he uses this stage to tell a very universal study about how one can find his or her

individual voice in a society like that. It's a very beautiful book. It's well-written and structured. It's the textbook about how a writer can use this setting for a universal story.

E: Say something about yourself that people might be surprised to know.

S: I will say that one of my favorite banal things to do is watching video clips on YouTube of monkeys and cats. It's really amazing. The monkeys are always interested in cats. They like to have pets. It's interesting because there are physical similarities. They create a very special bond. I'm interested in inter-special relationships in general. This is a good example.

E: Name a foreign author whose works have influenced your own.

S: The biggest influence on me is an author who at the time I read him was not well known and that is Mikhail Bulgakov. *The Master and the Margarita* influenced my prose, almost as much as the surrealists. I think that book is my favorite of all time.

E: Which of your characters do you relate to the most?

S: There's a symbiotic relationship between the author and his or her characters. Each character is made from so many things in the author, I think. There is a difference between writing in the third person and in the first person, too, obviously. I have a very strong relationship with the main character of *Mánasteinn*, Máni Steinn. He is one of the most sympathetic characters I've made. I put very much of myself as a sixteen-year-old in this character. In a way, it was my way of revisiting many of the elements that made me who I am. For example, he's obsessed with cinema. I'm still very much a film buff, and still watch films endlessly. In the book, his main obsession is a seven to eight hour long film that was released from 1915-1918. It's about a band of nihilists who are attacking French society. I made a contact point with this character by making him such an avid film buff.

E: Are you currently writing another book? What is the book about?

S: I usually am working on three books at the same time because the research for my books takes a long time. My latest book began in a way in 2001 when I started collecting information about the Spanish flu epidemic in Iceland around 1918. Around the same time, I started researching the film culture in Reykjavík in the beginning of the century, and I realized one day that all of this research would come together into one character, the main character in *Mánasteinn*. I'm usually doing research into certain fields. I don't even know for certain that the research will converge into one book; it certainly isn't always expected. I usually entertain three ideas at a time. I'm slowly finishing a trilogy that I started in 1994. I'm working on a short novel that I think has a relationship with my latest book and *The Blue Fox*. That novel deals with a character who spends his last days on Earth, terminally ill, fighting for an unworthy cause.

E: *What is your favorite part about writing? What is your least favorite part about writing?*

S: My favorite part is, of course, doing the research, gathering the materials, reading strange, old texts, and then suddenly discovering a piece of writing that sparks an idea and ties it all together. It's the handiwork that is the difficult part. I am a lazy person, and it's difficult to put it all together. But I enjoy the intellectual process of putting a text together. There isn't really anything negative about this part of the process. I enjoy most aspects of writing. I don't like to do readings. I'm fine with talking about the books with an audience. I don't like being in the media, on television, on the radio. I became bored with that. It became such a big part of the literary landscape, these literary interviews, they publish books every two years—how can they possibly have something new to say after two years? That is the only downside. I do enjoy travelling with the books. I'm very much aware that I'm writing in a very small society. I made the decision to be an Icelandic author. And of course you never know if a book has a broader appeal until it's published abroad. There is, of course, the temptation to write your Icelandic book in such a way

that it appeals to a broader readership. Are you betraying your primary readership by doing this? That question always lingers.

E: Describe your first memories of writing. Did anyone in particular encourage you to pursue writing as a career?

S: Nobody in particular encouraged me to write, but no one discouraged me either. When I discovered Icelandic modernist poetry at the age of fifteen, it brought the writer out of me. I have many memories of sitting at a typewriter that I borrowed from school trying to find my way as a writer. The typewriter makes what I'm doing more visible to me. I have many positive, warm memories about when people responded well to my first book.

E: Do you plan on collaborating with Björk in the future? What are the rewards and drawbacks of working with Iceland's most famous and infamous public figure?

S: We have been friends since we were teenagers; we are very close friends, so it's always an option to collaborate. She sometimes calls me and asks if I'd like to be involved with a project. There was something about our perspective on the world from the very beginning that made it easy to take music and poetry out into the world. We didn't see ourselves as any different than poets and musicians abroad. We expected respect for what we were doing.

E: Did you attend the Academy Awards ceremony? Recount that experience.

S: It was strange, but interesting. I was happy to be there. All of the sudden you are in auditorium and the presenter on the stage is calling out your name. It was odd being a part of something that, up until that time, we had only watched behind our television screens. I was happy we didn't win in the end.

Einar Már Guðmundsson is one of Iceland's most celebrated contemporary writers, having won the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1995 for his masterpiece *Englar Alheimsins* (*Angels of the Universe*), as well as the 2012 Swedish Academy's Nordic Prize, often described as the "Little Nobel." He received the 2015 Icelandic Literature Prize for his novel *Hundardagar* (*Dog Days*), and he has been nominated for this award a total of six times throughout his career.

E: Einar, why do you write?

EMG: If I knew why, I might not be writing. There are so many answers to this question, but one of them must be that I feel like I have something important to say, like I have a message to give. I like to express myself, and somehow it has become my profession to formulate feelings and create meaning. I also like the freedom of this job a lot. I like to be my own master, and I have the self-discipline to do it. I like that I am my own alarm clock. It becomes kind of a lifestyle because you are always working. You never know when a good story will come to you. For me, writing is a long process, where I write the story—something that's on my mind—and then I put it somewhere, keep it, and come back to it later. When I come back to it, I add a new dimension. My writing is built like a house under construction—I am always finding a new narration, a new viewpoint on old things. Writing is an unclear idea; it's like wandering into the woods, not knowing where you are going, but finding new areas, new places. By the final stages of the story, I know where I am going, and I've tied it down.

E: In your opinion, what is the most important piece of Icelandic literature written in the last decade? In the last century?

EMG: I think for the twentieth century you have to, of course, look at Halldór Laxness, Gunnar Gunnarsson, and Þórbergur Þórðarsson. For poetry, I would have to mention poets like Steinn Steinarr. Halldór Laxness is, for those of us who come after him, like an academy, an institution.

He's so important because he's at the same time classical and very modern. He comes with all of the modern elements and integrates them into classical Icelandic literature. What's peculiar about him is how many masterpieces he wrote. Most modern writers have maybe one, two, or three, but he wrote at least twenty. Some say he's like a nineteenth century author in the twentieth-century. I want to mention his socio-political works *World Light*, *Salka Valka*, and *Independent People*. I would also mention the poems of Sigfús Davíðsson. His poems inspired me and taught me a lot about the language. You also have this trilogy by Jón Kalman Stefánsson, the novels of Bragi Ólafsson, and then you have the saga-style writings of Einar Kárason. You also have these new voices like Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir. She writes in more of a philosophical tradition than a story-telling tradition, like most Icelandic authors. There is a book by Bragi Ólafsson called *The Pets*, the books in English by Sjórn, and the novels of Gyrðir Elíasson as well. This is all very close for me, though, as a modern Icelandic author, so I cannot select one book from all of these. It's very difficult.

E: Say something about yourself that people might be surprised to know.

EMG: I've written a novel about alcoholism, and I attend Alcoholics Anonymous. It has been a difficult challenge fighting alcoholism. I went to a rehabilitation center in 2005. Unlike so many writers, I didn't find this connection between drinking and working on books. I was always sober when writing, but anyone can develop a dependency on alcohol. I wrote a book called *Behind Bars*, because I got a letter from the state prison from a prisoner who had been reading my books. He told me his story. Three years later, I met him at an AA meeting. This prisoner was a drug dealer along with his girlfriend. When you get down to the basics of alcoholism, you realize that it can happen to anyone. Middle class people are often very blind to their situation. I don't know if this is peculiar, but it's part of my life. When I became more successful and had more

money and developed this demon, I was very often going abroad and having readings. It was a very functional period in terms of writing, but then it became harder and harder to stop. It also became this bad consciousness when I was drinking. I thought about stopping, but whenever I stopped, I was thinking about drinking. In Iceland, it's very accessible to go to a rehab clinic and very accepted. In Iceland, rehab is free. Every Iceland can get a rockstar treatment at the clinic. When you develop this drinking habit, you become cynical and depressed, but when I entered rehab, I became the old Einar, caring about social issues again. The interesting thing about coming out of alcoholism is how many elements from the process of writing are involved in the recovery process. For me, alcoholism is a very interesting existential problem.

E: Name an Icelandic author and a foreign author whose works have influenced your own.

EMG: Of course I already mentioned Sigfús Davíðsson and Halldór Laxness. I would also mention Guðbergur Bergsson, who I read as a teenager. I would also say Gabriel Garcia Marquez. When I was in my twenties, I became a specialist in Garcia Marquez. I would read his books in English translations, if an Icelandic translation was unavailable. I somehow thought Latin American literature was so inspiring. I discovered the same elements of magical realism in Icelandic literature, talking about supernatural things as though they were natural. His works opened up a new world for me. Garcia Marquez is a writer I always come back to, the same with Guðbergur Bergsson. He's been translated a lot into Spanish. He is for me and my generation very important. When you are a novelist and a poet, you somehow become interested in everything. You are not especially looking for good books: you are often looking for books about special subjects. If you are asking a question about how the French Revolution affected Iceland, you seek out those books. I am living in the past, and today I'm so much more interested in what the social memory has forgotten. That's the kind of place where I belong. There are a lot of

places. Another one of my major influences is rock-and-roll, for example Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg, and Frank Zappa.

E: Which of your characters do you relate to the most?

EMG: The most famous character in my books is the narrator of *Angels of the Universe*. He's based on my late brother in a way. But I am very fond of all of my characters. A lot of my characters are inspired by my ancestors and their stories. I find my personality among all of my characters. I don't write about people who I don't understand. I don't have to like them, but I have to understand them, the person, however much of a failure they are. I like a character based on my uncle in my trilogy; they typically sent him away because he was difficult to socialize. He became a left-wing sympathizer. One of his friends was very similar to him. This character, who got off a ship in America, went missing, but then returned to Iceland four years later, and eventually travelled to Spain to fight against Fascism.

E: Are you currently writing another book? What is the book about?

EMG: My next novel is kind of a work of historical fiction. I am asking this question about this volcanic eruption in 1783 and its effect on the rest of the world. It's about a boy who sailed to Copenhagen, and he was one of the people who discovered that Tanzania was an island, not a peninsula of Australia, like was previously thought. He became a king in Iceland for two months. It's a social story, but at the same time, both funny and tragic. This character is incredible, and I am also writing about the priest who wrote the "Sermon of Fire," Jón Steingrímsson. I am reading his text now and also telling his life story. These two characters fascinate me deeply. I was originally going to write about something else, but these stories drew me in, and I couldn't forget them.

E: What is your favorite part about writing? What is your least favorite part about writing?

EMG: When you are a writer, there is a kind of mythology that says that there are good days and bad days, and the bad days are a part of the good days. If you are always thinking about what shape you are in as a writer, then you wouldn't write so much. What you learn by the process of writing is that you know you could write the same page over and over again to the point where you get resentful. When you are steeped in something, you have to do something else. For me, I always have a lot to do, and I also like that I can do multiple things at one time. It would be really easy for me to be inside my head all day long. It's always a question of finding this harmony between what you are writing and what you are doing out in the world. When you are writing, you get this feeling that you are writing something very important. Sometimes when you finish it, the people do not always agree with you, or you don't get the positive responses you hope for. Being modest is a misunderstanding; one should always compare himself or herself to the great writers. A good book does not always have to be internationally known. I think, in a way, we are also blinded by the celebrities and their world, but of course, it's a nice idea that one day writing will make you rich and famous. I think the driving forces for writing are many; sometimes you can ask which version do you want? I can tell you this, and I can tell you something else. People sometimes ask me what are the methods I use for writing a book, or how I am going to tell the story? I don't know! I never know until afterwards. I cannot envision myself as a prisoner to a method. I can talk about the method after I'm finished.

E: Describe your first memories of writing. Did anyone in particular encourage you to write?

EMG: I sometimes say when I was about twenty I experienced a kind of volcanic eruption and began to write poetry. It was like smoking. Once I started, I couldn't stop. I resolved that I was going to do this professionally, that I was going to make it happen. I was studying history and literature at the University of Iceland. I used my studies as an alibi to read lots of books. As a

boy, I was very talkative, always telling stories. I think it was a very good solution for the environment that I would tell stories to myself. My parents were very encouraging. They thought it was a good idea, and there was no discussion about it. One summer I asked for support from my father. At that point, he didn't know if I was going to be able to do it. My parents come from different backgrounds. My father was born in extreme poverty. He was brought up on a farm. He and his brothers and sisters, they did not have this long education, but they were storytellers. They all had a certain education, despite their poverty. I interviewed many of them in order to keep their stories alive. It's Homeric. All four of them were taxi drivers. They were like psychiatrists, hearing lots of stories from lots of people all the time. When I was talking to them about the old times, when I was writing my books, I thought it was so interesting that one of them, for example, had been a sports star, holding a record for hammer throwing. He told his stories like Marquez. On my mother's side, she was from a middle-class family. They were not rich, so they struggled to afford everyone's education. They all became music teachers, engineers, natural scientists, except my mother. She started working for a bookshop and educated herself by reading all of the books! She memorized poems, etc. and passed this information on to all of us. In Iceland, we have a very strong education in learning poetry. We were required to memorize works by our national poets. I think it was good for us. It gave us a sense for the language. I come from the generation right after Iceland declared independence. At the same time we were learning the national poets, we were also listening to Megas, Frank Zappa, etc. There was this split between the national and the international, and we were caught in between, so we are born out of these contradictions. I cannot in a way put a finger on when it began, when I started to write, but it was always in the air. And also these times in the sixties made people very curious about a lot of different things, both socially and artistically.

E: *Why did you choose to write about mental illness in Angels of the Universe? Was it difficult to write sympathetically from the perspective of someone who is losing his mind?*

EMG: I guess it has something to do with the fact that I knew it from my own life with my brother. I got acquainted with his friends from the hospital. I also belong to this generation that grew up with this rock-and-roll culture, so there was a lot of debate about what normality was, and who was going to define it. Frank Zappa was always writing about this question; it was not so abnormal to think about it, it was something in the air at the time, and in a way it always is. And when you look at surrealism and this way of describing hallucination, it's something very challenging to do in text, but the main thing was this pain of experiencing how my brother, a clever guy, never had a chance after this stamp of mental illness was placed on his forehead. We were always discussing this, his situation, so I was always certain that I would write about it someday. In *Angels of the Universe*, everything gets its real name. I didn't feel it was more difficult to write that book than my other books. I think one always has the same dilemma when writing novels. In the final version, you have to find the balance between the tragic and the comic, the darkness and the light. The challenge in writing *Angels of the Universe* was the fact that I had to rewrite it so much.

Winner of the 2011 Icelandic Literary Prize for Fiction, **Guðrún Eva Mínervudóttir** is one of the most daring and innovative young voices in Icelandic literature today. She has published eight novels in total, including her widely celebrated *Allt með kossi vekur* (*All Is Awakened With A Kiss*), for which she was awarded Iceland's top literary honour. Her novel *The Creator* (*Skaparinn* in Icelandic) was a commercial success in Iceland when it was first published in 2008; it is the first of Guðrún Eva's works to be translated into English.

E: Guðrún, why do you write?

GE: I have so many answers to that question, and they depend on my mood. I feel like I need to, but I'm never sure why. The theme of my book *Yosoy* is about the huge yawning gulf between two minds and the human need to bridge this gulf: it's like you want to connect with other people somehow. When I read, it makes me feel less lonely. I want to touch others in the same way I've been touched by literature. I believe in literature. It's deeply practical to tell stories and consume them. I think civilization needs that in order to continue; we need to be able to put ourselves in other people's shoes. I also secretly like the attention; I like to be heard.

E: What role do you believe Iceland plays in the international literary scene? What is unique about Icelandic literature, in your view?

GE: The uniqueness of Icelandic literature has something to do with the Icelandic attitude of megalomania. Icelanders have always been doing many types of jobs without mastering one of them. This leads to some unprofessionalism, which can handicap us as a people. However, this attitude makes us wild and gives us a strong belief in ourselves. Everyone feels so important. We're very different than Eastern nations, where the self isn't valued as much. In some ways, we're more American than America. However, we have more courage to write because of this attitude. The market is so small, so every writer who is published needs to be a bestseller. We have to take our really impractical ideas and mold them into a practical, marketable novel. You have a lot of people longing to express themselves in an over-the-top artistic form.

E: In your opinion, what is the most important piece of Icelandic literature written in the last decade? In the last century?

GE: My favorite book that came out in the last decade is called *Doris Dies* by Kristín Eiríksdóttir. I think she is my favorite Icelandic writer; she's quite young, younger than me. She

has great things ahead of her. This collection of short stories is really fresh. Halldór Laxness is, of course, the most famous; his works haven't impacted me directly, but he's one of the most important. Þórbergur Þórðarsson always feels modern to me, when I read his books. You can't place him into any specific category. He's deeply personal, so you can never pin him down. I've read everything he has written, so I feel like I know him personally. Halldór Guðmundsson is like the pope in the Icelandic literary landscape. He could tell that Þórbergur's writing had left a deep impression on me, so he actually asked me to lecture on his works without knowing for sure that I had read his books. Gyrðir Elíasson and Vigdís Grímsdóttir have influenced me, as they have influenced most young authors who are working in Iceland today. Vigdís was one of the first Icelandic writers to write about lesbian love; she's always been very brave, but not so straightforward, and I respect that. I found that was something I wanted to do at the time. Young authors in Iceland, I feel, owe a lot to them both.

E: Say something about yourself that people might be surprised to know.

GE: I have become the queen of buying nothing. I make my own everything. I make my own bread, toothpaste, deodorant, and jams. It's become a part of my routine, even though I don't know how I find time to do it.

E: Name an Icelandic author and a foreign author whose works have influenced your own.

GE: I have to say that Steven King has influenced me, even though no one could see that in my work. There's something about the way he writes really interestingly about everyday things. He himself is aware of that. I think it has something to do with his attention to detail, to true conversation. He's really good at grasping something true and putting it on paper. He's good at convincing his readers that what he's saying is true. There's a Belgian writer, Amélie Nothomb, who lives in France who writes short novels (very slim), but they're bursting with life. I like her

novel *Fear and Trembling*. It's half fiction, half real life. It's about a young Belgian woman who spends five years in Japan working for a prestigious company; it's about a five-year culture shock. Making fun of yourself is the most noble way to be funny, in my view, and that's what she does. Amélie is so wild at heart, wild in a low-key, intellectual way, a really pleasantly shocking way. It wakes you up somehow, really pumps you up.

E: Which of your characters do you relate to the most?

GE: I think all of them are me in the archetypal sense. They all represent an aspect of my psyche. Writing fiction is a very naked profession. I really identified with the main character of *Yosoy*, a sixty-year-old professor who teaches at a university. He always felt like a part of my animus.

E: Are you currently writing another book?

GE: Yes, my next book is a rather simple story about a teenage girl, Alma, who goes on vacation with her family to Spain and has an epiphany, where she sees Jesus (or has a sunstroke). She becomes deeply religious, making everyone around her feel really awkward and uncomfortable. When someone becomes deeply religious, it's strange here in Iceland. Here, the nonbeliever isn't ostracized. People take religion half-seriously in all sorts of things. Religion is deeply personal, so when people start talking about religion openly, they get really uncomfortable. Even the priests are practical, not overly religious.

E: What is your favorite part about writing? What is your least favorite part about writing?

GE: When I've written a work and distributed it among chosen people, I feel like I've accomplished something, like it's really going to transform into a book. Writing is a group activity, so I enjoy sending my work to other people and hearing their feedback. In doing so, it becomes clear to you that writing is a subconscious activity. You need people to help interpret

your subconsciousness with you. It's also a way of stepping out of the solitary confinement you've been in. Writing is exhausting when you are grasping everything out of thin air and trying to put it all together. I hate the nitpicking at the very end, when your publisher is giving you all sorts of minor feedback. At that point, you just want to be through with it, to get rid of it.

E: What inspired you to write your novel The Creator?

GE: The book I wrote before *The Creator* had the theme of the relationship between the body and the mind, what we are to one another. I wasn't quite finished with that theme, so I wanted to find a different way to get into it. I was staying in Paris for a writer's residency, and I came across an article in *Marie Claire* about sex dolls and the men who enter pretend relationships with these dolls. There were so many things in this article that blew my mind; the men being interviewed would refer to women as "organic women," which I found absurd. The dolls were so creepy and intriguing. I thought that writing about dolls would be a great way to address the theme of body of consciousness. There's no physical or scientific explanation for consciousness; it's the only thing in the world we can't explain. In philosophy it's called the "problem of consciousness." It's called a problem! I feel like the topic falls perfectly into the realm of fiction. I chose Akranes as the setting because my mother lived there at the time. She married a man who represented the culture very well; it's very conservative. I've always compared it to an oil town in Texas. I thought it would be so interesting to have such a strange character living in such a strange town.

Gyrðir Elíasson is a highly-respected Icelandic writer and translator, who received the 2011 Nordic Council Literature Prize for his short story collection *Milli trjáanna* (*Between the Trees*). He also won the 2000 Icelandic Literature Award and Halldór Laxness Prize for Literature for

his book *Gula húsið* (*The Yellow House*), among other prizes, and currently stands as one of Iceland's most revered short story writers.

E: Gyrðir, why do you write?

G: I suddenly got the urge to write when I was about seventeen or eighteen. I hadn't really written anything seriously before that. I wrote some poems and some short prose, experimental stories. Poetry was definitely my first choice. I still write prose in a way that is close to poetry. I was brought up in an artistic environment. My father was a painter and so was my brother, which made it an easy choice to become a full-time writer. I don't remember exactly where I was or what I was doing when I made the decision. I was reading a lot of poetry when I was a teenager and, at some point, you get the urge to write something yourself. I don't know if I was going through my first period of depression at the time. I was diagnosed with depression around that period. I guess you can point to that as my first experience with writing. Depression can both fuel and hinder one's writing. I remember when I was going to *menntaskóli* in the North, a teacher of French and English had a great impact on me. He was a poet. I got to know him very well. He had a fantastic library of French and English literature, and this was a great time for me to get started writing, I think. My uncle was also a writer. He was not a fiction writer, but he was a kind of historian. He lent me books and was a great reader of literature. I soaked up every influence around me. I knew a lot of people who were interested in learning about other cultures. I didn't feel isolated growing up in the countryside. In fact, I think at first I was thinking about becoming a painter like my father, but I realized that I didn't have the talent for that, so I gradually shifted toward writing. I still have an interest in painting, and it definitely influences my writing even to this day. Ever since my father died seven years ago, I have begun to draw pictures to unwind after writing.

E: What role do you believe Iceland currently plays in the international literary scene? What is unique about contemporary Icelandic literature, in your view?

G: I very often feel like Iceland literature has very little meaning in the context of world literature. We can certainly make a contribution just like everyone else. I'm very pessimistic about the future of Icelandic literature. I've had a lot of difficulty with translations. I struggle a lot to find translators. If you look at Icelandic literature in the context of the Icelandic sagas, then it's safe to assume that there's something bigger that other nations should look at. For example, the English-speaking world has a lot of interest in Icelandic literature. The language's ancient roots can hinder the production of Icelandic literature. I think after Laxness, the act of writing became very difficult for those who followed. For decades writers lived in Laxness' shadow. There were people born in the 30s and 40s who had Laxness looming over them. Even Þórbergur Þórðarson lived in the shadow of Laxness, I feel. But I think, now, things have settled; he's looked upon as a great writer, but people have found new ways to get around him. He influenced me when I was very young, but now I don't feel any pressure from him or his writing style. I think international writers are influencing contemporary Icelandic authors. A lot of young Icelanders have not read the old Icelandic novels and sagas. A lot of young Icelanders only read books in English now. It's possible that it's just how you look at it; in my opinion, you have to have the knowledge of what came before you, but not everyone agrees. Laxness was also influenced by international writers, but he digested it in such a way that was entirely his own.

E: In your opinion, what is the most important piece of Icelandic literature written in the last decade? In the last century?

G: I would maybe say a book of poetry by Ísak Harðarson called *Rennur upp á nótt*. It stuck with me; it was impressive and original. I would like to mention Bragi Ólafsson's *The Ambassador*.

It's a strange kind of book, difficult reading, and repetitive. It moves slowly. It stays with you a long, long time after you read it. In the last century, I would say *Sálmurinn um blómið* by Þórbergur Þórðarsson. I have never seen anything like it in world literature. It's about the relationship between an old writer and a little girl in an apartment complex. He describes the day-to-day relationship between these two figures, and he throws in all of his strange beliefs. It's the same with his book *Bréf til Lára*, or *Letter to Laura*. He was naïve about politics, so you have to ignore his politics. But there are many splendid things within both books. He was a very strict Communist. He never admitted that anything was wrong with the Soviet Union. In every other respect, he was an utter original, a genius of Icelandic prose, moreso than Halldór Laxness even, in my opinion. But then, we also have Svava Jakobsdóttir and her book *Leigjandinn*. It's a piece in the Modernistic tradition. It's about someone who welcomes a guest into her home, and the guest makes himself too much at home. She doesn't write in a banal or naïve way; it's subtle and skillful.

E: Say something about yourself that people might be surprised to know.

G: I was a football player at one point, when I was seventeen. I even taught football to one of the most popular football players in Iceland, Eyjólfur Sverrisson, when he was six years old. I have since lost interest in football, barely watching the World Cup.

E: Name an Icelandic author and a foreign author whose works have influenced your own.

G: I would name Þórbergur Þórðarson, definitely. I would also name Bruno Schulz, the Polish writer. I also think the American author Richard Brautigan is a highly underestimated writer. He is one of my favorites. I also like Knut Hamsun's older works *Pan* and *Victoria*, which were more impressionistic, very different from his later works, like *The Growth of the Soil*.

E: Which of your characters do you relate to the most?

G: Probably the painter in *The Book of Sandá River*. I used something from myself and a lot from my father and brother, who are painters, in that character. But, of course, I'm different from this character in many ways, too. You can never invent a character completely. It's always something within yourself or someone you know who inspires every character in your books. You are always combining these characters and people in new ways. I have a difficult relationship with Halldór Laxness to this day. He was like the Icelandic Goethe, an epic writer who wrote everything. At least in recent years I have had a difficult time reading his books, but I think I could do that now.

E: *Are you currently writing another book? What is the book about?*

G: I just finished two books, a book of short stories and a book of short prose. In some ways, they are related to my older stories; they are a mixture of fantasy and reality. There's always something that inspires me from my daily life. I could say every story in my new book is inspired by something that happened in my daily life. These are not traditional short stories. The plot is not the main thing; it's the atmosphere, the tone of the writing.

E: *What is your favorite part about writing? What is your least favorite part about writing?*

G: My favorite part is to write down the first draft. The worst thing about writing is the final editing of a story. I'm very meticulous about the editing process. I am very involved in every step of the process. That way I learn something about every aspect of writing and I learn something about myself as well. I make many drafts, and it's this obsessive part about writing that I hate.

E: *Why do you predominantly write short fiction? Do you think that the short story receives the respect it deserves within the literary world?*

G: I think the short story is underrated in every part of the world; it has always been like that. All of my so-called novels are really short novellas, and my short stories are really short short stories. I don't really know why. I don't think writers have control over the way they write. I couldn't write a huge novel. It's not in my nature.

Jónína Leósdóttir is a respected journalist and prolific author in Iceland, having published fourteen novels to date, in addition to radio and stage plays. She is the wife of Iceland's former Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, the nation's first female Prime Minister and the world's first openly lesbian head of government.

E: Jónína, why do you write?

JL: Because I can't not write. I think that is a very simple answer. I can't imagine life without writing. Even if I didn't have a publisher, I would still write. It just feels uncomfortable not to write because it's my outlet.

E: What role do you believe Iceland currently plays in the international literary scene? What is unique about Icelandic literature, in your view?

JL: Of course, our heritage. It goes back to our roots in the sagas. I think we have a very unusual history. We go back through all of these centuries in the sagas, whether you believe they're true or works of fiction. I think for such a small island we have such a remarkable literary history. Literature has influenced how Icelanders view themselves. A lot of Icelanders view Iceland as a literary nation. It also has to do with our nature. People in isolated farmhouses wanted to hear stories from the few people who visited their farms. There was no newspaper, so stories sustained Icelanders. Throughout the centuries, as Icelanders were working in the evening, someone was always reading to the others until the radio came along. Reading was the primary

form of entertainment, and it became a part of our culture to relate stories to others. People who came to visit to tell stories were viewed with much respect. They were a breath of fresh air. I also don't think you can find anywhere else such a small nation publishing so many books. Books are a popular gift during Christmas, more so in Iceland than in other nations. It's part of Icelandic tradition to go to bed with a nice book on Christmas. Nordic crime fiction is also really popular; Iceland's environment makes a perfect location for dark crime novels. I don't think there are many nations with such few inhabitants who can boast about having a Nobel Prize winner in literature. Stephen Fry once asked the question, which nation has the most Nobel Prize winners per capita? I think those things are sort of what make us a little bit different in a literary sense.

E: In your opinion, what is the most important piece of Icelandic literature written in the last decade? In the last century?

JL: Well, in the last century, definitely the novels of Halldór Laxness. He was unique. I don't think if we're looking back over the last century it's possible to overlook him. I don't think it's possible to pick one specific novel by him that stands out. When you are a part of the Icelandic literary scene, it's hard to determine what will be relevant years from now. I always like something that's got a little dash of humor in it. There is a little book that I think I'd like to nominate for this. It's a book by Kristín Steinsdóttir called *Á eigin vegum*. It was nominated for the Nordic Council Literature Prize, and I'm one of the women who started the Women's Literature Prize here in Iceland. This novel by Kristín was nominated and won during the first year. We have three categories, and she won in the novel category. It is a very small book, more like a long short story. It's about an old woman looking back on her life. If I had to nominate another one, I would say *Ljósa*, also by Kristín Steinsdóttir. In it, she discusses something very

taboo—mental illness. People built cages back in the old days to deal with the mentally ill. They had no choice. It was a very dramatic book.

E: Say something about yourself that people might be surprised to know.

JL: I'm vegetarian, and I also carry Sudoku puzzles in my purse everywhere I go, in case I find myself with a moment of free time.

E: Name an Icelandic author and a foreign author whose works have influenced your own.

JL: I can immediately say who the foreign author is: Mavis Cheek. She writes fantastic novels. She has also written some historical novels, but I don't like those kinds of books. She's been writing for decades. She writes novels about human relationships. She's obviously well-read. She has a lot of references to all sorts of things that make you want to research things for yourself. They are stories about modern relationships, among families and friends. Usually I get rid of books, because otherwise I would drown. I would never ever get of her books. I wouldn't even like to lend them to people because I just want them there. Steinn Steinarr, the Icelandic poet, had an influence on me. My father had his complete works, and I read them as a child. I think it's just fantastic poetry. I never get tired of reading his poems.

E: Which of your characters do you relate to the most?

JL: Probably the main character of a novel I wrote in 2011. The Icelandic title is *Allt fínt, en þú?* The main character of this book is called Nína, and she is the kind of character who irritates the reader because she tries to be everything to everyone, and to make peace with everyone around her. She has such good intentions that she can be kind of irritating. A lot of readers mentioned this about her. I was influenced by Jane Austen because I wrote my BA thesis about *Emma*. I like the idea of being a writer who creates a character that you like but know that everyone else will not. It's also interesting writing about a character that drives off a cliff trying to please everyone.

E: Are you currently writing another book? What is the book about?

JL: I just finished sending a manuscript to my editor. Now I'm waiting, strung up, always checking my emails. When you're writing, it can take years to write a novel, and then all of that work can be destroyed by one email. The novel is about two marriages, two couples, an older couple and a younger couple. The novel takes place during turbulent days in the history of two marriages. It's got humor in it, it has drama in it. It's a black family comedy. I've already started a new one as well, instead of just sitting down, waiting for an email. I love to study human relationships, see what makes people tick. I always write about the same thing. It's an endless supply of material. Relationships go through so many stages. This novel is also for grown-ups, but I most enjoy writing for young adults. In Iceland, because there are so few people, the young adult market is naturally very small. Financially, working as a young adult writer is nearly impossible without grants. Teenagers tend to wear their feelings on their sleeves, which makes it such a fantastic time of life to write about. Everything is either black or white. They are such a fantastic audience.

E: What is your favorite part about writing? What is your least favorite part about writing?

JL: My least favorite bit is having to sit for long periods of time because it's hard on my back. It's difficult when you're in the middle of a creative flow, and you have to stand up to rest your back. It's physically difficult. The best thing about writing is having an outlet for all of these ideas in my head. I don't know what would happen to me if someone tied my hands behind my back to prevent me from writing; I think I would explode. I think I have an overactive imagination. I love sitting at cafés, watching people, wondering what their lives are like, wondering why they are meeting with others. Something terrible would happen to me if I didn't get it out of my system somehow. I was once in a restaurant in England and there were two men,

one from India and one from Britain, and I felt compelled to ask them why they were there. They weren't offended. They said that the British guy was getting married to one of the Indian guy's sisters. It was preparation for their wedding. Sometimes I just need to know! I love seeing how people interact, how people's body language changes when a third person enters a conversation, etc. I just love to make up stories. For example, one time I dropped the key to my car on the ground and thought it would be a great way to start a novel. I guess it's just part of your character, taking real life and wondering how you can use it.

E: Describe your first memories of writing. Did anyone in particular encourage you to pursue writing as a career?

JL: When I was in school I was asked to write essays all the time. In my school days I received a lot of encouragement to write. Writing essays was the subject I liked the most, even if I was just writing about my summer vacation. Even when I went to *menntaskóli*, I was encouraged by my Icelandic teachers to write. Sometimes when I turned in a good essay, the teacher would encourage me to read it aloud to the rest of the class. It took a while, though, before I realized I could do this for a living. I had to take care of my son as a single mother, which prevented me from pursuing my passion full-time. I've been writing one book per year, ever since my wife Jóhanna encouraged me to write full-time. I know I'm not going to be here forever, so I try to use my time wisely. I wake up early and write throughout the day. I'm so appreciative of this opportunity, so I want to use my time to the fullest. I'm incredibly thankful for it. If I was on my deathbed without pursuing my dream, I would be profoundly sad, knowing that I didn't follow this dream. I gathered a lot of experience as a journalist. I learned how people express themselves, how their body language is when they're telling you about some dramatic life event. A lot of it was off-the-record, but it influences my writing to this day. Every experience gets

used somehow. I interviewed a woman who was having her baby. She called her husband to tell him that she was in labor, but there was a fire at her house that killed the husband. A father I interviewed lost both of his daughters in car accidents in a short period of time on the same road. These people's body language and reactions to these traumatic life events have been stored in my mind over many years and have helped me become a better writer. I'm very interested in how people speak, which helps me when I'm writing plays. I get irritated when I read a sentence that someone is saying in a conversation, and I know that nobody talks that way in reality.

E: *Why did you want to write Við Jóhanna, an autobiographical account of your relationship with Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir? Describe what the book is about for those who don't read or speak Icelandic.*

JL: It's the story of almost thirty years of my life, and it starts with me meeting Jóhanna in 1983. It spans almost thirty years, and it's a story that would have never been written if Jóhanna had never become Prime Minister of Iceland. She loved making laws, making life easier for people who were vulnerable, disabled people, single mothers, etc. We were sort of forced into the global media during the height of the economic crisis. The media took interest in the fact that she was the first world leader who was openly lesbian. She didn't have time to do interviews with global media about her private life, so she limited the interviews to her work as Prime Minister. She had other things to deal with, but we realized that our story was important to the LGBTQI community. I feel that everyone has an obligation to do his or her bit in this matter. There were so many things that nobody knew, except us. It was our private history. We knew we wanted to preserve our story because we didn't know if we would one day develop dementia, for example. Then our life would be told by others. We were not active participants in changing attitudes, but we realized that it was important for us to contribute our voices. From 1985-2005 we had a very

secretive relationship. We were worried about our relationship's potential to damage Jóhanna's political career. We both had boys from previous relationships, and we wanted to protect them from bullies. The last chapter of the book is about an official visit we made to Beijing and how we never thought this would happen. Our sons read about our story for the first time when we wrote the manuscript. You have to be alert as a gay or lesbian; laws do not prevent violence toward gay people. We have to be careful so that we don't allow things to revert to the way they were. It's so easy to lose the rights you have been fighting for.

E: Do you believe your writing faces more scrutiny because you are married to a prominent political figure?

JL: I don't think so. I think when people are reading they judge the book on the content. It might affect people's decision whether or not to buy my books. People's politics might affect people's decision to purchase the book. For example, we met someone at a party who received a copy of *Við Jóhanna* and wasn't sure she'd like or relate to the book, but once she read it, she became fond of it. It's easy to have a misconception of it because of politics. For my fiction, though, I don't think it affects people.

Activist and author **Oddný Eir Ævarsdóttir** is a powerful poetic voice on the Icelandic literary scene. She has written lyrics for Icelandic popstar Björk, and her novel *Jarðnæði* was nominated for the 2011 Icelandic Literature Prize and the Icelandic Women's Literature Prize. Her recently-published short story "The Blue Blood" was translated into English by Philip Roughton.

E: Why do you write?

OE: Because I need to. It's that simple, actually. Because I feel, and I've always felt, the urge to influence the world. I have a bold commitment to make the world better. It's very lousy to be so

megalomaniacal, but that's somehow my urge: to analyze and understand things. So it goes hand-in-hand. I always wanted to be a writer and a farmer, and I studied philosophy just to develop my mind, but I ended up finding it so interesting that I just continued. I didn't care about the medium through which I wrote, literature or philosophy, but I eventually realized that I needed to remove myself from the academy, for the sake of liberty, for the sake of freedom. But my studies are why I chose to write literary fiction. I want to change the world, but I don't want to change the world. In my writing I'm searching for understanding. I'm trying to understand love, what to give, what to receive. The question of love is the most urgent question that I have. I'm always in a space of urgency when I write. My writings are about nature, love, and the search for stability. I'm a perfectionist, who's relentlessly searching for the perfect method, the perfect form of writing.

E: What role do you believe Iceland currently plays in the international literary scene? What is unique about being an Icelandic writer?

OE: I would say that during the twentieth century the need to express the Icelandic mentality was present. Icelandic writers tend to occupy many artistic fields at the same time, not just literature, not just writing. Icelandic writers, for some reason, need to do something else as well. Being a writer in Iceland is very difficult from a financial standpoint. In Iceland, we have to justify ourselves and explain what we mean when we declare, 'I am a writer.'

E: In your opinion, what is the most important piece of Icelandic literature written in the last decade? In the last century?

OE: Firstly, I will say that I'm against the idea of creating a literary canon. I'm not so keen on that, but I would say *Independent People* or *Iceland's Bell* by Halldór Laxness were immensely important. I advise friends to read those books and have done so several times. I would also

recommend *Letter to Laura* by Þórbergur Þórðarson, and also *Advent* by Gunnar Gunnarsson. I would give that one away as a present at Christmastime. That book is so emblematic of Icelandic literature in the past century and would say that's my number one choice. In the last decade, I would say a book by Vigdís Grímsdóttir called *Kaldaljós*.

E: Say something about yourself that people might be surprised to know.

OE: I've written three autobiographical books, so I'm in the business of revealing myself, so I have a hard time naming something specifically surprising. I'm constantly making systems of organizing my clothes. It's an ongoing dilemma: I have a need to classify things. I'm constantly trying to organize and create systems. I sometimes structure my books in the same way that I organize other things in my life. I use the theme of obsession in my novels. I nourish it, instead of fight against it. I've found it's best to go through it, to nourish it. I now have an obsession with chanting rhymes. It's like an addiction to reciting *rímur*, old Icelandic poems.

E: Name an Icelandic author and a foreign author whose works have influenced your own.

OE: I made a list of those the other day. The authors who have influenced me the most are philosophers, like Derrida, Arendt, and Nietzsche as well. Þórbergur Þórðarsson, too. There's just a burning desire to understand something in their works. These writers fit into the realm of finding order amidst chaos, and it's a nice balance between the two.

E: Are you currently writing another book? What is the book about?

OE: I'm writing one novel, which is for the first time not autobiographical. It's about a the relationship between the master and his or her student. I'm actually writing a poetry book as well. I don't know what it's about, and I don't know if I will publish it. It's about language and it's about motherhood. I am also writing another book for an American publisher that's about the

journey to become a mother and not succeeding. It's very autobiographical, about people who are trying to have a child, without success.

E: What is your favorite part about writing? What is your least favorite part about writing?

OE: My favorite part about writing is “smelling” the right novel to pursue and bring to fruition. Once I've identified a story, I then draw the form of the work before I write it. My habit of classifying things serves me well during this process. The first steps of making connections and actualizing this form are extremely appealing to me. My least favorite part is when my editor says the book is ready, after it has been proofread two times, and I cannot stop altering the book. I'll keep trying to change the form completely, but by that time it is too late. I have difficulty letting my works go.

E: Explain what your novel Jarðnæði is about for those who don't speak Icelandic.

OE: It's about finding the perfect place where you can live in harmony with nature and in harmony with the one you love. Is it possible to be in love with someone and also be creative and crazy? Is it possible to be a small island and be responsible with nature? It addresses a lot of the huge questions that arose after the economic crisis in Iceland. It also talks about pilgrimage, trying to find your origins. It's about finding yourself and your place within your family. It's about finding your place in the world. It's about finding your place as a writer. It's about Iceland finding its place in the world. Ultimately, it's about contingencies of love.

Jón Kalman Stefánsson currently stands as one of Iceland's most prolific authors, and is known for his distinctive stream-of-consciousness prose style. He has been nominated for the Icelandic Literature Prize three times, and has also received three nominations for the Nordic Council Literature Prize.

E: Jón, why do you write?

JK: That is a very common question, but a very tricky one to answer. If I could answer it in a deep way, I wouldn't be writing. One of the reasons I write is because I don't know why I write. If you are a writer or a poet, you have to do it; it's an urge that you can't escape. How can I tell if I'm a writer or not? If you are sure why you write, then you are not a writer.

E: What role do you believe Iceland currently plays in the international literary scene? What is unique about contemporary Icelandic literature, in your view?

JK: We have a number of very fine writers, but we still are not influential yet in the realm of world literature, but I do think that we have some unique, special voices. In literature today, everyone is reading everyone; it's like a big melting pot and everyone is mixed in. I think if you have a country with a strong literary heritage and special environment like Iceland, then it must also have something special in its arts. Of course, you have to look at musicians like The Sugar Cubes and Sigur Rós, whose works are very Icelandic. You see how Icelandic authors are influenced a lot by foreign authors. Those who wrote the Icelandic sagas were very much attuned to the events going on in Europe. Sometimes it's said that there is a special kind of Nordic literature. You can see it in the works of Knut Hamsun; there is a sort of sadness, a melancholy in the voice of Hamsun. You can find this voice in many of the Nordic writers. That mix of melancholy and poetry is apparent in the works of Halldór Laxness. There are some Icelandic writers like Gyrðir Elíasson, who are obviously influenced by American writers, but also possess something distinctly Icelandic in their work.

E: In your opinion, what is the most important piece of Icelandic literature written in the last decade? In the last century?

JK: I worked as a critic twenty years ago for *Morgunblaðið*. I quickly learned that I often start to disagree with myself three months after writing a critique! You can be taken by a work and then one year later forget everything about it. If you go to some old critics saying that someone or some book will be great, ten years later nobody recognizes it. The easiest thing for me to say is that for the last fifteen years or so has been a good time for Icelandic literature. Many others have been writing good books that have been translated and won prizes abroad. Works by Gyrðir Elíasson and Hallgrímur Helgasson all affect you in some way. There's no Icelandic author who is affecting me in the same way. I have been writing and reading for thirty years, so it's getting harder and harder for me to find an author who takes me away, but when it happens, it's a thrill.

E: Say something about yourself that people might be surprised to know.

JK: Unlike many authors of my generation, I worked a variety of jobs before going to school. I worked for three years in fish slaughteries and house-building. But then I saw a program when I was eighteen on Icelandic television on a Monday evening. I was tired; it was a program about the universe, an American documentary. The narrator was a born teacher; he made complex ideas easy to understand. After watching this program, I wanted to become a scientist, to explore the universe. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of this teacher and discover new planets, new solar systems, new galaxies, but slowly I discovered that what I was going to find was in the words, in poetry, so therefore I write to discover new galaxies, new worlds.

E: Name an Icelandic author and a foreign (non-Nordic) author whose works have influenced your own.

JK: Gunnar Gunnarsson's works have influenced me. He was born around 1889. He is a very interesting author in many ways because he was the first Icelandic author to become a full-time author. He wrote only in Danish, which allowed him to achieve this goal. He wrote about Iceland

in Danish. I also read José Saramago. He's a great stylist. I think in the last century he and Knut Hamsun are the greatest stylists in world literature. They can write about very trivial things and expand it into something very important, just through their styles.

E: Which of your characters do you relate to the most?

JK: Well, I never think of my books in that way. When I have written the books, I've written them and they are gone. They don't belong to me anymore. They belong to the readers. But the good thing about being a writer is that everyone takes what you say seriously. I know there's a part of me in every character I write, but it doesn't interest me. I'm interested in the works of others, not mine.

E: Are you currently writing another book? What is the book about?

JK: The only thing I can do in this life is write, so, yes, I am writing a book. I published a book last year, and the one I am writing now is a follow-up, from the same world. Stories in books never interest me. The story in novels should be the least important thing, because what is more important is what is said and how it is said. Therefore, if you say it in the right way, in the right style, you can write about people drinking coffee for 100 pages and the readers are convinced that they are reading about a very important thing, the questions about life and death, questions about God. If you can describe the book by telling what it's about, then the book is a failure. The same goes with life. If you are describing the life of a person, you can't say what it's about. You have to describe the details, how the person smiled, how the person talked to children, how the person walked across the street. In those details, you can envision a life.

E: What is your favorite part about writing? What is your least favorite part about writing?

JK: The easiest part about writing is when I'm writing the first draft. When I start the second draft, it's all about finding the weaknesses, discovering that everything I've written is rubbish,

the worst, but it's also a very important time. The most important thing an author can do is doubt himself, to always try to find a new way of starting a story. I'm publishing books now every one-and-a-half years. The times when I'm writing a book are full of bright and dark moments, difficulties, agony, and then again, bright moments, sometimes all in the same day. It's part of the job. I keep myself from my madness by running with my dog. For me, it's part of being an artist.

E: Describe your first memories of writing. Did anyone in particular encourage you to pursue writing as a career?

JK: The first time I wrote was in school. It was in my second year of *menntaskóli*. My teacher in Icelandic asked us to write a short story, something I never thought of doing. Writing at that time was something I had never considered. It started as something I was required to do for school, so I sat down one evening to write it and had to deliver the story the evening after. It was a very special feeling. It started out as shit. Then, something happened. For the first time in my young life, I got a little bit closer to understanding something. I don't know what that was, the meaning of life or something like that. I was going to places I knew of, but had never felt before. It was an experience. And then I delivered the text and looked forward to hearing what the teacher said. The next week, we got the pieces back. The teacher passed it to me and looked at me and accused me of stealing the story from a Danish author, who had I never heard of. I was so angry, but he saw in my expression that he was on the wrong track. It was a bitter taste for me for many days, but I slowly began to understand that it was a great praise for me. The first story I wrote he thought was stolen from an author. Nobody in my family that I knew of was writing. I grew up in Keflavík, a place not known for many writers. It started as an urge that began to take me over.

E: According to bokmenntir.is, you failed “an important exam” and never finished your degree at the University of Iceland. In your opinion, what makes a great author? Is it his or her life experience? Education? What shapes his or her unique way of seeing the world?

JK: I was taking a class in literary criticism. At that time, I considered myself a poet and didn't want to take the exam. I was a very arrogant young man and didn't study. I never finished my thesis. I was running out of money because I spent a lot on night life. So I found work as a teacher in a high school and then I didn't have time to think about studying. At that time, I started thinking about writing more deeply, so there was no need to finish school. Everything shapes you as an artist or a person. First and foremost, you have to be born a great author, just like one has to be born athletic. If you have a talent, you can be a superb soccer player but only by training more than all of the others. The same goes with writers. Having a talent is obviously the most important thing, but it won't help you if you don't train. The most important thing for a writer, especially at the beginning, is to keep writing, writing, writing and reading, reading, reading. Of course, your greatest friend is the doubt. He's a very dark friend, but without him, you are lost.

E: If you could not be a professional writer, then what else would you like to be?

JK: I would like to be a musician. When I was ten years old, I wanted to be the fifth member of the Beatles. If I didn't start to become a writer, then I could have saved John Lennon's life! [he laughs]

Gerður Kristný currently stands as one of Iceland's most prominent and prolific writers, publishing a total of seventeen books, including two novels, a short story collection, nine children's books and five volumes of poetry. She is the recipient of the Icelandic Journalism

Award, the Icelandic Children's Choice Book Prize, the Halldór Laxness Literary Award, the West-Nordic Children's Literature Prize, and the Icelandic Literary Prize. Her book-length poem 'Blóðhófnir' was nominated for the Nordic Council's Literature Prize in 2010. Her play, *The Dancing at Bessastaðir*, was performed at the National Theatre of Iceland in 2011. She studied French and comparative literature at the University of Iceland and worked as the editor of the Icelandic magazine *Mannlíf* from 1998 to 2004. She was born and raised in Reykjavík, where she still lives and works with her husband and two sons.

E: Gerður, why do you write?

GK: Because I have the urge to write. I've always had the urge to create something. As a child, I drew pictures. I soon realized that my pictures needed a story to accompany them. Slowly, I stopped drawing but kept on writing the stories. There has never been anything that has drawn me away from writing stories. As a child, I was a gymnast, but I was lousy at it. Writing stories was something I could do. I never found another hobby. I participated in a competition when I was a teenager. I used every opportunity to write. When I was fifteen, I published my first poem in the newspaper. I felt so honored. It was always important to me to show others what I was writing. I was never just writing for myself. I showed my stuff to my teachers and they gave me advice. I'm still in contact with those teachers, and I still ask them for advice! One of those teachers translated my poems into Esperanto. It's the first thing I felt good at. I've written twenty books and two plays, half for children, half for grown-ups. I've gathered all sorts of criticism, some good, some not, but I've never felt like quitting. I was a journalist in 1994, when my first book was published; I had just graduated from University, and for the next ten years, I was a journalist and editor at a monthly magazine. In 2003, I went to the south of France for a writing holiday. After these three months, I realized that I wanted to be a full-time writer.

E: What role do you believe Iceland plays in the international literary scene? What is unique about Icelandic literature, in your view?

GK: I sometimes feel as though Icelandic literature is very dramatic. There always has to be a murder, a suicide, a volcanic eruption, or people yelling at each other. When I read, for example, Danish literature, it doesn't feel like anything is happening at all in a 200-page novel, but of course, there is. All of the tension in the text shows through. I read a lot of Scandinavian novels, and I listen to a lot of international poetry, as I've been attending poetry festivals for the past few years. Icelandic literature has the old Icelandic sagas. We quote the sagas all the time, and we have these roots that we expect everyone to know, but it is always risky business coming to other countries and expecting them to know who, for example, Freyr, is. The world has opened up for Icelandic literature and it's wonderful to see how Icelandic authors are getting attention abroad, for example Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir and Arnaldur Indriðasson.

E: Say something about yourself that people might be surprised to know.

GK: I was a gossip journalist for two years when one of the Spice Girls, Scary Spice, was dating an Icelander. Writing gossip and poems is pretty much the same thing.

E: Name an Icelandic author and a foreign author whose works have influenced your own.

GK: The Icelandic poets, Snorri Hjartarsson and Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir, have definitely influenced me, as have the images of coldness in Marina Tsvetaeva's poems. The children's book authors Astrid Lindgren and Tove Jansson were the ones who drew me to literature in the first place. Therefore, I think it's important to read them.

E: Which of your characters do you relate to the most?

GK: In my poems, it's definitely often my own voice speaking when I'm writing about things from my past in my family, like my grandmother responding to her daughter's suicide. I'm definitely most personal in my poetry.

E: Are you currently writing another book?

GK: I'm working on three books at the same time. The most important one is a long poem. I think it's about time to write the first Nordic crime poem. It's due to be published next autumn.

E: What is your favorite part about writing? What is your least favorite part about writing?

GK: My favorite part is finishing a book and working with the cover designer. When I've been working on a piece long enough that I can show it to my editors—that's one of my favorite parts. Filling in the other 98% between the beginning and the ending of a story is by far the most difficult.

E: What is the most challenging part about writing books for children? The most rewarding part?

GK: It's exactly the same challenge as when I write for grown-ups. The story has to be interesting, and it has to make sense. I like being invited to read to children at schools. I often get more readings when I'm publishing a children's book, so it's nice to open kids' eyes to literature. I hear from teachers at the schools that when children meet the author of a book, they are more likely to buy other books by the same author. I taught a creative writing class in a school once. Some children just know what makes a good story. They are always eager to read their finished story to the rest of the class, and I really like that.

E: What inspired you to write your popular children's book Garðurinn?

GK: When I was seventeen, I was working at an antique shop downtown on Vesturgata. I realized that people were allowed to bring back furniture if they felt like something bad, some

evil force was inside it. That was just accepted. Icelanders have always been interested in spiritism. I found out that this interest in spiritism had started at the turn of the twentieth century, right after the ship carrying the Spanish Flu epidemic docked in the harbor at Reykjavík. Everything closed, and many perished. After that, Icelanders had a really difficult time accepting that all of these young folk died so suddenly and tragically. People became interested in spiritism as a way to contact their dead loved ones. I also decided to write a story about Reykjavík that evinced the same feeling that people from New York City or Barcelona have, that sense that everyone should know the city. I wanted to show kids that there is history here in Reykjavík. There's a lot of superstition about dead people. The churchyards supposedly come alive during the last day of the year, like in the book. I thought it was interesting to write about Iceland's capital in this way.

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About the Author

Born in Augsburg, Germany, raised in San Antonio, Texas, Elliott Brandsma is a professional educator, journalist, and writer, whose articles and interviews have appeared in the *Iceland Review*, the *Reykjavík Grapevine*, *Stúdentablaðið*, and *Stopover*, Icelandair's in-flight magazine, among other publications. He graduated *summa cum laude* with high honors from Texas State University in May 2013, where he earned a B.A. in English and Fine Arts and was named a finalist for the university's highest undergraduate recognition—the Lyndon Baines Johnson Outstanding Senior Award. His undergraduate honors thesis at Texas State details how both World War I and II impacted the Icelandic national consciousness and influenced the Icelandic art, literary, and cultural scenes. A passionate educator, he also earned his professional teaching license in high school-level English/Language Arts from the same university.

After graduating from Texas State, Elliott studied Icelandic language and literature at the University of Iceland for one year as a Fulbright Fellow. His varied professional experience includes teaching high school-level English, copy editing, tutoring various subjects, journalism, teaching art, office work, and medical records management. To date, he is the recipient of fifteen meritorious scholarships and research grants, including an Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture scholarship. In 2016, he joined the Miami—Dade corps of Teach for America, hoping to expand educational opportunities for under-resourced communities in the South Florida region.