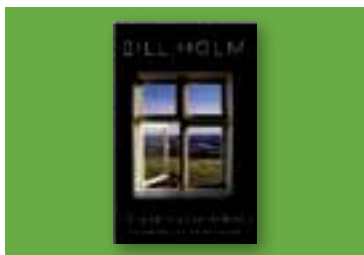


OK. So we know the letters are a tad small here. Not many pretty pictures either. Still. These are book reviews. If you're at all interested in reading books, then you will be familiar with the layout. So quit your complaining. This page is of the highest value.

Books | Review

The Windows of Brimnes

Bill Holm  
Milkweed Editions, 2007



In 1998, Minnesotan writer and teacher Bill Holm bought himself a house called Brimnes in Hofsfós, a small village a half-hour's drive from the town of Sauðárkrúkur in northern Iceland. He began to spend his summer vacations there, playing the piano, writing, watching the mountains on the other side of Skagafjörður, entertaining visitors and getting to know his neighbours and his own Icelandic roots (which were actually in Vopnafjörður). Bill Holm died at the age of sixty-five in February 2009, leaving this book behind as a record of his connection with Iceland.

The Windows of Brimnes has ten chapters, each of which can be read as an independent essay. The first four cover Hofsfós, Skagafjörður, Icelandic birds, and Icelandic folktales. Then Holm shifts his view towards America, with an essay about Icelandic immigrants and his family history, another about his youth and young adulthood in the shadow of the Vietnam War, and a third about the question of how much choice we have in deciding who and what we listen and pay attention to. The three concluding essays discuss Icelandic Christianity (both in Iceland and North America), Icelandic poetry, and finally Icelandic (and American) politics.

Holm summered here, so his Iceland is a bright, magical place full of creativity and celebration. He speaks about beautiful things: horses, folktales, birdwatching, writers, poets, musicians, and friends. He knows that Iceland will be strange and exotic to many of his readers, so he blends in some of the beginner stuff that we're all familiar with – how the phone book is organized by first name, how special the tólt is, how the moon astronauts trained here, how horsemat is better than you think, and how great it is that there are no mosquitoes in Iceland.

A focus on the fat and sweetness of a country is typical of ethnic literature in America. Italian-Americans write lovingly about risotto and ribollita. Scottish-Americans shore up the shortbread-and-haggis industry. Native readers tire of this quickly, but must understand that this kind of talk is what makes Diaspora members feel like they belong and should come back for a visit.

Holm saw untapped value in small communities, whose neighbourliness fascinated and comforted him. His 1996 book *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth* argues that one can lead a full and satisfying life in Minneota, Minne-

sota (population 1500), his hometown. *Windows of Brimnes* is an ode to the way of life in Hofsfós and Skagafjörður. Holm has little appetite for Reykjavík, which, he regrets, "is now a real city."

Just when the reader is ready to dismiss Holm as hopelessly in the grip of what Jim Rice has called the Iceland-is-wonderful discourse, comes the book's last essay, "Fog." In it, Holm recognizes that he has presented an image of Iceland slathered in "whipped cream and jam." Writing well before the bank collapse, he proposes that Icelandic "idealism, intelligence, and humour" is also mixed with "venality, foolishness, and greed." He especially criticizes aluminium processing and the dam at Kárahnjúkar, which he says amount to the deflowering of the Icelandic landscape.

Regardless of one's stance towards smelters and dams, this is a welcome recognition that life in Iceland is not just a midsummer idyll. There is another Iceland where trout are raised in pens, not fished from lakes and streams; few people write, and fewer still farm; and daily life is, like elsewhere, burdened by political and moral uncertainty and dispute. So far, Icelandic fiction writers such as Arnaldur Indriðason and Hallgrímur Helgason have explored this Iceland better than any foreign observer.

Key to Holm's love of Iceland is that Iceland was his refuge from the disturbances of the American national soul. Holm was a freethinking Christian rather than a fundamentalist, a truth-teller rather than a dissembler, an observer rather than a war-maker, and someone who questioned what he was told to believe. He felt that in Iceland, society shared his values, or at least, more so than in America.

Iceland is, in truth, a disputatious and contentious land where public discourse moves from one tense debate to the next. A recurring theme is whether Iceland should become more like the United States or more like Europe – in areas as diverse as health care finance, national defence, Internet commerce, eating habits, city planning, energy privatization, and alcohol sales. I think Holm was pretty knowledgeable about current affairs in Iceland, and nevertheless decided against making *Windows of Brimnes* a book about the country in all moods and months of the year.

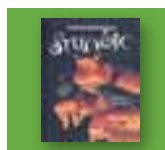
Indeed, I suspect that there are a lot of readers who will like Holm's sweeter, creamier take, and that *Windows of Brimnes* will age well. It's already out in paperback. I had a good time reading it, and I can say it's one of the better Iceland books on the market – a concise and readable record of an American's attachment to the North Atlantic. ❖ - BY IAN WATSON

*Born in Minnesota in 1943, Bill Holm taught writing at Southwest Minnesota State University and was the author of twelve books of poems and essays, including Eccentric Islands, The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth, Playing the Black Piano, and the intriguingly named Boxelder Bug Variations. Holm died in February 2009.*

Books | Review

Stumble, an Icelandic Troll Story

Brian Pilkington (illustrations and text)  
Mál og menning, Reykjavík 2000



Brian Pilkington, a Liverpool native living in Iceland since 1977, is one of the country's most beloved children books' illustrators. His award-winning illustrations have played a big role in the Icelandic trolls' image makeover that has taken place over the last twenty years or so. Pilkington's art has supplied a generation of young Icelanders with the image of the benign and just a little bit simple looking trolls. He has even managed to make Grýla look nice. A quick look into Icelandic folklore will tell you that the trolls have not always been as warm-hearted and chipper as Pilkington's *Stumble* and his family, who even describe themselves as "giant-sized bundles of fun." In fact, the trolls of old were more prone to forcing humans into marriage with them (mostly the men, as there is a curious shortage of male-trolls in our tales) and, if that failed, the trolls had no reservations about eating the humans. But pedagogy doctrines have somewhat changed and it is not fashionable to frighten the lives out of children any more.

*Stumble* tells the tale of a confused troll who wakes up one night after a very long sleep with two ravens perched on top of his head. He is covered in snow and can't remember a thing about who, or even what, he is and how he got there. He puts his trust in the ravens who guide him through the harsh and wintry Icelandic landscape all the way home, where he is reunited with his family and gets his memory back. Pilkington both writes and illustrates, and the text and pictures work nicely together, though I can't help but notice that they are the work of an artist turned writer rather than the other way around. The text is both simple and straightforward. The gorgeous illustrations are neither. Full of colour, humour, warmth and enough detail to make you want to turn back the pages for another look, they are evidence enough for the reasons why Pilkington is Iceland's most successful illustrator to date. He even manages to make a scene of Iceland's snow filled highlands and glaciers look inviting. The trolls seem a homely bunch and their clothes are based on Icelandic traditional wear and obviously inspired by Vikings, making them perhaps look more Scandinavian than strictly Icelandic.

The book is obviously aimed at children and is simple enough for those who are able to read for themselves. It will also serve well for reading aloud to those who are still young to read on their own; the balance between the length of the text and picture details on each page is good enough to keep the little ones' attention engaged throughout the read.

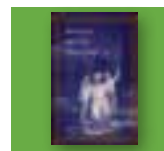
Overall it makes for a very heart-warming homecoming for *Stumble* and the book serves as a nice and fun way to introduce children to a part of Icelandic folklore. The modern, less scary version of it, that is.

❖ - HILDUR KNÚTSDÓTTIR

Books | Review

Angels of the Universe

Einar Már Guðmundsson  
Mál og Menning, English edition first published in 1995  
Translation by Bernard Scudder, 1995



This is the story of Paul. He was born in 1949, on the day that Iceland joined the NATO alliance. And he believes that being welcomed into this world by protests and tear gas must mean something. Everything in Paul's life could appear com-fortingly normal – his childhood in Reykjavík, his youth, his family and friends – if he didn't always jump forward to his present reality as a schizophrenic in Kleppur, a mental health institution in Reykjavík. And when teenage Paul meets Dagný, who is the initial cause of his final breakdown, the first signs of mental disease already show. As his illness slowly takes over his normal life and sanity, the descriptions of a life as an institutionalized person increasingly overshadow the memories of his normally appearing youth.

Paul introduces many different characters of his life to the reader, one of them being King Baldwin, who advises Paul to watch over the angels who are guarding him. He also vividly describes his friends from the mental health hospital, like Oli Beatle, who believes that he wrote the Beatles' songs and Viktor, who talks and behaves as if he was an old English nobleman. Or Peter, who is waiting every day for a call from the University of Beijing that will confirm his doctorate degree.

Trying to escape from their reality in Kleppur, these friends seize every opportunity to go out to town and forget about their sickness, the medication and the alienation from society. In a surprisingly sane vision of things, they fool around and make jokes about themselves and other people and have a good time. This moving novel is filled with beautiful, tragic metaphors and images. Some of Paul's adventures with his fellow institutionalized friends are even utterly comical and hilarious. But it's hard to give in to one's laughter given the bitter and capitulating tone of Paul's descriptions. He is in a state of pitiful disorder and, consequently, his memories are always interrupted by the harsh descriptions of painful and inhuman medical treatment and imprisonment. And in the end, when Paul is fey and disconnected from this world, the words of King Baldwin will echo in the reader's mind: 'You haven't looked after your angels'.

Einar Már Guðmundsson is one of Iceland's most famous writers. He dedicated this book to his deceased brother Páll and poetically processed in it his own experiences with Páll's mental illness. He clearly gave the world one of the most acclaimed Nordic novels in recent times, which was awarded the Nordic Council's Literature Price in 1995. In his German translation from the same year (the one under review now) Bernard Scudder manages to convey metaphors and pictures beautifully.

❖ - IRINA DOMURATH

Poetry | Eiríkur Norðdahl

The Word is a Virus



Imagine a poem so robust and resourceful that it could survive humanity. Imagine that the Americans finally go completely bonkers and rip the globe

apart with liberational glee, the nuclear dust finally settles and all that's left of mankind is poetry. The mark of craftsmanship has always been durability. A good cabinet has a couple of hundred years in it. A decent car will carry you for ten to fifteen years. The best laptops have at least six crash-free months in 'em. The Eddas are as good now as they were a thousand years ago. But a poem that'll outlive humanity?

Enter: The Xenotext Experiment, a "literary exercise that explores the aesthetic potential of genetics in the modern milieu" in the words of its author, multi-maniac, mad scientist and poetic mastermind, Christian Bök (né "Book" – The Christian Book, get it?). And Mr. Bök has the all the God-complexes you'd expect from a savant named after the good Book: not satisfied with simply producing dead poetry for the page Christian Bök has decided to make his poetry come alive. Literally.

"I propose to encode a short verse into a sequence of DNA in order to implant it into a bacterium," says the biblical scribe / poem-god in an essay on the matter. The plan is that the text be composed in such a way that, when translated into a gene and then integrated into the cell, the text will be "expressed" by the organism, "which, in response to this grafted, genetic sequence, begins to manufacture a viable, benign protein – a protein that, according to the original, chemical alphabet, is itself another text".

The bacterium will not only store a poem – it's not only a living poem – it's also supposed to create its own poetry, elevating Christian from mere poem-god to poet-god: creator and programmer of poets (what sort of poetry Christian's future army of bacteria-poets will write, no one knows – perhaps they'll make their own bacteria. Perhaps they'll be rhyming neo-formalists).

Freaked out already? Until recently chances of Christian actually doing this were slim. Not because it was theoretically impossible – quite the contrary, similar things have already been done (the cybernetic expert Pak Wong partially stored the lyrics to Disney's "It's a Small World" as a strand of DNA inside a bacterium) and Christian has already proved his capability for writing creatively within severe constraints (each chapter of his book, *Eunoia*, contains only one of the vowels). But science doesn't come cheap. I don't think anyone actually expected Christian to ever get the money needed – including the poet-god to-be himself.

A couple of months ago, the grants came through. Christian Bök now only waits for his sabbatical from the University of Calgary to start.

It's officially time to start freaking out. ❖

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