



Three hundred and fifty thousand, seven hundred and fourteen verses. Twenty lines per verse, and every line rhymes with the following one. That's how long Andrei Gheorghe's poem is. It's almost four times longer than the Mahabharata of ancient India. Forty times longer than The Iliad and The Odyssey combined and twenty times longer than Dante's Divine Comedy.

It's (appropriately) called The Longest Poem in the World and it's composed by aggregating real-time public twitter updates and selecting those that rhyme. Every day the poem grows longer by about 4000 verses. Some of it sounds inane ("Playing hide and seek at the park. :) / Waiting on Heather and Mark!") A lot of it sounds funny ("im hoping that its easy and i can finish it quickly / They made porcupine love, so stiff and stuck and prickly" and "Had a great gala evening and won lots of prizes / And also simulating penis sizes"). But most of it's actually fantastically mundane. Boring. Stupid. People waiting for their favourite TV show to start. People twittering about God during the sermon. People announcing their hangovers like victories. People regurgitating sayings and Oscar Wilde quotes.

Gheorghe's has called it a collective consciousness. And in effect it is—it brews an essence of human thought and if you read it for too long you'll be moved. You'll get angry. You'll feel every ounce of wasted life like somebody was yanking your haemorrhoids with a tire-iron.

But perhaps this is humanity. Perhaps this is the essence of our being, making The Longest Poem in the World one of the most relevant pieces of art around. One that mirrors (a part of) reality in a one to one correlation. One that, if read in its entirety, would annihilate the little that may still be left of our souls and leave us completely aware

of the emptiness that envelops our lives.

The poem consists of what hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of people deemed most worthy to communicate to the world and/or their friends at a given moment (in real-time). And it rhymes, which somehow accentuates the inherent nihilism of this deranged and disturbing poem.

I don't blame twitter. The results would probably have been the same (or worse) if the material had been small-talk. In person. Offline. And I'm not sure my own statuses and/or small-talk would've been any more interesting. Yet perhaps the sensation it evokes is false—not based in the reality it stems from. Perhaps the world is not as empty and meaningless as The Longest Poem in the World makes it seem. Perhaps these lines of poetry — these bits of small-talk — are beautiful and filled with meaning when experienced in their natural habitat.

The soldiers in Homer's Odyssey were never turned into swine. Not really, I mean. We suspend disbelief and allow Homer to take us there, and so the soldiers indeed turn into swine. Gheorghe has in some way (perhaps) turned an innocent humanity into swine, and just maybe that does not detract an ounce of worth from the poem itself (at least if we allow for the artistry of Gheorghe's poem to be purely conceptual—as formally it's mostly horrendous). This non-relation to reality might also make it the perfect representative for reality, in Georgia O'Keefe's words: "Nothing is less real than realism. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis that we get at the real meaning of things."

And so regretfully I must admit that (once again!) I cannot yet say whether or not there is meaning in the world. Oh, the nihilism! 🍷

Children's Reykjavík

Salka, 2008



By the time adults have children, they're often out of touch with kid culture and need help figuring out

what to do all day with their three-foot wonders. Even once things get going reasonably well, it's easy to get into a rut and forget about fun things that are just around the corner but missing from our mental map of town.

Parents need a regular stream of new ideas for their kids. These can come through word of mouth, serendipity, the newspaper, or looking in the telephone book. They can even come from a guidebook to things that kids and parents can do. There are already guidebooks like this for many cities. Now there is one to Reykjavík, called Children's Reykjavík / Reykjavík barnanna.

Children's Reykjavík is small and thick, with over 400 nicely designed spiral-bound pages, perhaps forty of which are given over to advertising. The rest is divided into ten chapters that are labelled with colours and numbers but no titles, so to find a particular subject you have to hunt a bit in the table of contents or index. The content is bilingual, with English usually on the left side of each opening and Icelandic on the right.

There's a lot of information in here. The book covers a really good range of topics, including some that can be hard to find out about. For example, the book tells you where you can take your child for a haircut or family photograph, where you can hold a pre-packaged birthday party, where to find art and music courses, and where kids can go to summer camp.

The book also includes a few profiles of semi-prominent Reykjavík parents, who describe how they spend their time with their kids in ways that range from honest to slightly saccharine.

The book's English translation and proofreading is imperfect—not enough to spoil the information, but enough to make reading it a bit awkward (in one great blooper, we're told about an astrology club which meets at the telescope in Seltjarnarnes.) Also, the English usually translates only a part of the original Icelandic text, making the English entries markedly shorter than their Icelandic counterparts across the page.

The reviews themselves are most helpful when they appear to reflect the authors' honest opinion. At other times, they have a bit of a promotional feel to it and use marketing language sometimes seemingly derived from the brochures of the places reviewed. For example, on page 188 we are told that "Adams Kids aims to provide you with a unique and rewarding shopping experience that we're sure you'll never forget."

Children's Reykjavík doesn't tell us whether some of the listings were paid for, but the recommendation for KFC in the restaurant listings sticks out as possibly related to the KFC advertisement a few pages away. All guidebooks sit somewhere on a continuum from being entirely promotional to entirely independent. This book is perhaps a little too far towards the promotional side for my taste, although not so far to render most of its recommendations untrustworthy.

Overall, Children's Reykjavík is a useful but flawed book. It could be a lot better. But it's nice that it exists. And rather than criticizing the English translation, we should probably be glad that there's any English in the book at all! I'd say that paying 2.990 kr. for it (2.691 kr. at Bóksala stúdenta) is a worthwhile investment if you are fairly new to town and want to spend a couple hours socializing yourself into the world of children's activities in Reykjavík.

Children's Reykjavík is already out of date, like any guidebook. Some of the places mentioned in the book have already closed, like Hreyfiland and Saltfélagið. So for those who know the city already, I wouldn't recommend buying this book for reference. If you need, say, the opening hours or telephone number for Húsdýragarðurinn, it's easier to look on the web. But if you're just looking for new ideas and inspiration, flipping through this book is a fine idea.

Like other guidebooks in the twenty-first century, though, this one is caught in a set of Internet-age paradoxes. Why pay to own a little brick of colourfully printed dead tree when you can not only read it at the library but also get the same information, albeit unfiltered, online? And this book could be produced more cheaply and updated more regularly, and could reach a larger audience more quickly, if it was available on the web for free. But then there might not be any revenue stream associated with putting the information together.

For now, the publishers of this book stuck with the old style of embargoing their content, restricting it to those who pay for a copy that's printed on paper, and paying their bills with the revenue from these sales as well as conventional print advertising. This model still works, or at least inspires hope in prospective authors. But for how much longer? When someone eventually figures out how to fit books like Children's Reykjavík into a workable web-based business model, it may free guidebook authors to focus more on providing good content and less on the economics of selling paper copies.

🍷 - IAN WATSON

Trolls' Cathedral

Ólafur Gunnarsson

English translation by David McDuff and Jill Burows.

JPV Publishers Reykjavík 2008.



Trolls' Cathedral (original Icelandic title Tröllakirkja) is the first part of an acclaimed trilogy by author Ólafur Gunnarsson (the two other

being Potter's Field and Winter Journey, respectively). The novel was published in 1992 and nominated for the Icelandic Literary Prize the same year. The story takes place in 1950's Reykjavík and tells the tale of architect Sigurbjörn Helgason who has high dreams for building a massive and imposing cathedral on top of Skólavörðuholt (where Hallgrímskirkja church now stands) that will echo the shapes of the Icelandic landscape. He starts his own construction firm along with (and mostly financed by) his friend Guðbrandur, who is a master carpenter. Their first project is for the first franchised department store in Reykjavík. But things do not go according to plan, and Sigurbjörn soon finds his world crumbling as his marriage starts failing, his family life falls to pieces, the debts pile up, and yet Sigurbjörn strives to keep up appearances.

The novel has received almost unanimously good reviews, both in Iceland and abroad. It paints a very clear and interesting picture of Iceland's and Reykjavík's growing pains as the Icelandic society rapidly changed and the capital transformed from town to city. The story of Sigurbjörn is an epic tale of one man's downfall, and his fate follows a universal theme that could surely be translated and understood in any culture.

That said, I have to admit that although Sigurbjörn's fate is tragic, I did not feel for him very much. Perhaps it is one of the traits of the epic that the narrative seems to hold the reader at arm's length, creating distance between reader and characters. But maybe it was just because I found Sigurbjörn's character to be self-centred, nasty and extremely dislikeable. And the same goes for other characters in the novel. Even when Sigurbjörn's obnoxious eleven-year-old son is sexually assaulted and beaten, I could have cared less. The only character I felt remotely sympathetic towards was Guðbrandur, who is truly a victim of Sigurbjörn's extravagant dreams. But perhaps it is this distance from the characters that gives the underlying narrative the universal appeal that it has. Rather than being a tale of one man's ruin, Trolls' Cathedral has wider connotations that give it fable-like qualities.

Bottom line: A vivid picture of Iceland's growing pains in the 1950's.

🍷 - HILDUR KNÚTSDÓTTIR

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6 – 12 SEPTEMBER <

[www.bokmenntahatid.is](http://www.bokmenntahatid.is)

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[www.riff.is](http://www.riff.is)

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