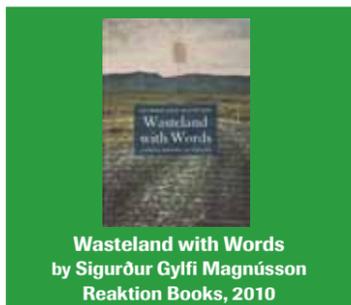


Literature | Review

# This Was The Real Iceland



It is a little difficult to decide which of two ways to describe Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon's new book 'Wasteland With Words'. Fifteen of the book's eighteen chapters are about Iceland from roughly 1800 to 1940, with particular stress on the years from 1870 to 1920. Trained in social history, Sigurður Gylfi focuses on now-classic themes such as childhood, death, literacy, housing, work, settlement patterns and emigration.

He uses a lot of examples from the Strandir region, which he has studied in depth.

In this way the book is about the years when Iceland was transformed from a very poor farm-based peasant society into a semi-modern, semi-independent European country with a fishing-based economy.

On the other hand, the book is subtitled 'A Social History of Iceland'. One chapter (chapter ten) deals with the history of Iceland from 800 to 1800, and two chapters (the final ones) cover 1940 to the present. Including these chapters makes the book into an alternative to the "standard" English-language histories of Iceland, on sale at every bookstore here, that usually trace the island's history from settlement almost up to the present.

Looked at in this way, 'Wasteland With Words' could be seen as a challenge to what we could call the Saga-age view of Icelandic history: the idea (common among tourists and newcomers to Iceland) that understanding the age of settlement is key

to understanding the country. 'Wasteland With Words' reads like a long, and in my view successful argument that if any period is the key to understanding Iceland today, it's the Nineteenth century.

As in Sigurður Gylfi's other writing—most of it available in Icelandic only—he tells the story of Iceland from the bottom up, through examples culled from diaries, newspapers, and the histories of particular families. He avoids discussing the ceremonial and official. He has read an amazing number of Icelandic autobiographies. His writing is fluid, lithe and informal.

The book opened my eyes to the Nineteenth-century roots of some current Icelandic customs. The popularity of summer work for teenagers goes right back to the ubiquity of child labour a hundred years ago. I understand the ambivalent attitude towards dogs in Iceland better now: dogs on farms were the key vector in the spread of hydatid disease (echinococcosis), a revolting and sometimes fatal parasitic infec-

tion that afflicted as much as a quarter to a half of Icelanders in the late Nineteenth century. And one reason for the tradition of out-of-wedlock births in Iceland is that until surprisingly recently—well after America freed its slaves—powerless, disenfranchised servants made up 35–40% of the Icelandic population and were not allowed to marry.

More depressingly, the shackles on consumer freedom in Iceland and the near-Soviet feeling to the retail experience here can be traced to the days when trade with Iceland was in the hands of a few Danish merchants. The poor condition of the older housing stock in places like Ísafjörður and downtown Reykjavík is a problem with very old roots. Our relatively low rate of high school graduation today and the delayed development of the Icelandic educational system in the Nineteenth century are two chapters of the same story. Iceland was not the only part of Europe that was impoverished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the situation here was unusually

bad and unusually slow to improve. Sigurður Gylfi's book shows how far we have come.

'Wasteland With Words' is a very fine introduction to Icelandic history, but I want prospective readers to know in advance that it's mostly about daily life in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries. My biggest criticism is that the design and print quality is not what one would expect of a forty-dollar book that's being distributed by the University of Chicago Press. The margins are too big and the print is too small. The photos would be easier to appreciate if they extended to the page edges. Both the ink and the paper are a bit grayish. I doubt that Sigurður Gylfi is making a lot of money off this book. I wonder if it would have gained more readers published simultaneously online, with open access, and on paper, in a cheaper paperback format.

IAN WATSON

Poetry | Review



Divided into sections ('Intro', 'Death and Life', 'Cosmic Dreams', 'Day to Day') with colour-coded titles, 'antennae scratch sky'

touches on life cycles, animal instincts, sexuality, cosmos, fruit and the meaning of the word "motherfucker". The 64-page book contains some good, some bad poems behind a cover sporting drawings of what looks like a fat flamingo and a sad, radioactive bunny.

The poems' are peppered with Greek gods' names and vague personifications of death, life and beauty, like in the poem 'Centaur,' but which lacks the ingenuity of more descriptive poems like 'Sabbath' in which Þórunn describes snowfall as "Unwritten snowy paper/ in the homedrive/ makes a marring sound./ An Arabic snow-poem/ written by tires." The poems that begin with simple ideas and expand out create

more poetic congruency than the those that begin with vague ideas and try to tie in intricate details.

One example where the simple to complex construction works is in the poem 'Beyond the Line'. The poem begins with the image of a woman throwing fruit waste into a compost and connects it to the process of a decomposing human body. "...no pollutive pyre/ or costly grave. It would serve humans best/ to be stewed into compost/ reviving dead forests and deserts." The poem describes the metamorphosis of a lifeless human body into an apple, maggot, bird and back to an apple, etc. The language of the poem turns an old idea into something new without being overly complicated.

The two biggest problems with the book are the lack of punctuation and centre alignment of every poem. Some of the longer poems like 'mama' and 'you're a good poet/ I can see it in your face' read more like stream of conscious and could greatly benefit from a more "streamlined" construction instead of centred alignment. Centre aligning every poem, without explicit reasoning, seems lazy and uninventive.

Þórunn's more playful poems (with some serious undertones) like 'Folk and Felines' describing the differences between dogs (who view humans as gods) and cats (who think they are dogs) are much more enjoyable to read than some of the heavier poems like 'mama'. The poem 'mama' ram-

bles on about how "motherfucker is a negative concept/ making it seem bad to service her/ let's make it beautiful, and being a bitch too" for nine pages. Unfortunately, the controversy overrides the lyricism. The poem lacks poetic forcefulness to merit such a complex topic.

Some of the descriptions of fruit relating to human sexual organs are pretty hilarious, especially in the poem 'L'amour dans le jardin/ or a fantasy about edible pulpy plants'. Avid poetry readers might not be too impressed, but for the casual one, 'antennae scratch sky' is worth a read.

EMILY BURTON

Poetry | Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl

# Future Perfect Poetry

When this text is eventually published the world will know who received the 2010 Nobel Prize for Literature. It will have been announced yesterday. The person in question will already be lauded worldwide, in today's newspapers next Friday, with a few dissenting voices perhaps mentioning cultural politics and even fewer voices claiming that prize-giving is invalid, that it reduces literature (and by association, the human spirit) to a competitive sport. But mostly we'll just participate in the joy, because everybody loves a party. And just like we know that our birthdays and Christmases and whatever don't have any gigantic "actual" meaning, they're still fun and we'd like to keep 'em fun, if possible.

When this text is written, however, the world (with me in it) does not know who will receive the 2010 Nobel Prize for Literature,

seeing as now it's Sunday the 3rd of October and the announcement isn't due until Thursday. That is to say, your yesterday, in my four days time. This is all due to a complicated lag in publishing tangible printed material that I won't go into. Suffice it to say, it could not have been otherwise.

I am terribly excited, of course. The front-runner for the LitNobel this year, at Ladbrokes bookies, is Sweden's own Tomas Tranströmer—a poet most people in the world have not heard of, but is an immense presence within the inconceivable world of poetry. The Swedes have not got a LitNobel since 1974, when Harry Martinson and Eyvind Johnson had to share one. I don't know how that works. Maybe you get half a gold medal. Or each winner gets a smaller medal than had he or she won alone.

And it seems Ladbrokes feels poets are particularly thinkable winners this year, with

Adam Zagajewski (Poland), Adonis (Syria), Ku On (Korea) and Les Murray (Australia) following Tranströmer on the list. They are mostly as or more obscure than Tranströmer (nobody reads poetry anymore, I say, shaking my head indignantly, last Sunday).

By now (or then, I mean, at publication), I guess you will know who got it. It probably wasn't Tranströmer, was it? Nor was it Philip Roth? It never is. But they always mention him. He's the guy that never gets it. Apparently he's nonchalant about it, doesn't feel it's any special honour—he feels American literature has towered over world literature for decades and that they don't need Swedish Nobels for justification. Maybe he's right. But it still sounds a bit arrogant, with a tinge of bitter disappointment. And, I would venture, it has something to do with his involvement with American literature—I doubt that he has read Tranströmer or Ku

On. Americans don't translate much, as Horace Engdahl, member of the Swedish academy has pointed out, they don't speak other languages much—and they're mostly not in any position to judge non-English literature (whereas most people, worldwide, read English-language literature—either in the original or in translation—which is one of the reasons why Philip Roth is so famous).

The race for the Nobel is no longer exciting, not where you are sitting, but over here, in the past last Sunday, we're still all very anxious to know. The writer chosen will enjoy immense rekindling of sales and translations worldwide, increased respectability and mentions, interviews, acknowledgment and critical response. But it doesn't last. It never does. In three or four months people will be going: "Tomas who?" Or "Did Philip Roth ever get it?" Or "Ko Un who?" (Am I right, was it Ko Un?) Oh, sure, a few nerds

still remember Elfriede Jelinek and Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio—and a few will remember Thursday's winner, but not many will be able to spell their names correctly and even fewer than that will be familiar with their work (although some will have bought it today—or tomorrow at the latest).

Because despite the good party, the good fun, the medals and the boatloads of cash—despite the respect, the myth-making qualities, the critical debates and the high-fallutin' rhetoric—we all know that literature isn't a competitive sport and nobody can tell you which books enlighten and which don't. Except for you, of course. But then again, you might wrong.

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