

# In Iceland, a Literary Tour Explores Rich History

By DEAN NELSON | NOV. 17, 2015



Statues of Hannes Hafstein, foreground, and King Christian IX in Reykjavik. Credit Bara Kristinsdottir for The New York Times

Standing in the dark outside the Reykjavik public library in the relentless damp chill that comes with a light rain at 40 degrees, I kept trying to zip up my jacket. The charcoal sky was a shade lighter than the inky ocean a few blocks away, but it was noon, not twilight. I had a few minutes to bundle up before an outdoor walking tour on literary Iceland began. As if on cue, the zipper snapped off in my hand.

I could write here, I thought. There is a constant struggle in this place, often larger than a failed zipper, a theme that inspired the 1,000-year-old Icelandic sagas that touch on the nation's Norwegian and Irish roots and the mythic tales of elves and trolls.

These days, the country is best known as the backdrop for the myths of our day: films like "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," "Interstellar," "Noah" and "Prometheus." (Not to mention the TV series "Game of Thrones.")

But as I talked to people in Reykjavik, the culture of storytelling seemed to be the source of their greatest national pride. The country has a nearly 100 percent literacy rate. Halldor Laxness won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1955, and Unesco declared Reykjavik a City of Literature in

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2011, only the fifth in the world. Researchers show that at least 90 percent of Icelanders age 16 or older read at least one book a year just for pleasure, and that the gift most requested by children at Christmas time is a book.



With a population of about 320,000, the country has more books published and more books read per person than anywhere else in the world, according to a BBC report. One in 10 will publish at least one book, the report said.

“In Iceland there are no ruins, no Viking ships to prove how we got here, so people think we evolved from cod,” said Andri Snaer Magnason, one of Iceland’s more noteworthy novelists, in a conversation after I took the tour. “But Icelanders have always presented themselves as a nation of storytellers. Stories had been the only contribution to the world culture before Bjork started having real influence.”

By the New York Times



The nonprofit group Hannesarholt occupies the historic home of Hannes Hafstein, who was a poet and the first minister for Iceland. Credit Bara Kristinsdottir for The New York Times.

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Iceland's pop-cultural exports have got the word out about its appeal. Tourism is an increasingly important part of Iceland's economy. Hot springs, sport fishing, glacier hiking, snowmobiling and bicycling are all part of the draw, as are visits to waterfalls and private flights over volcanoes. It has a natural beauty unlike any I've ever seen. But going off the beaten path here means exploring its overlooked literary scene.

I dipped my toe in by taking the tour of Reykjavik that the library conducts by appointment much of the year. One guide, Ulfhildur Dagsdottir, is a literary scholar, and the other, Maria Bordardottir, is an actress. By the time the tour began, about 10 of us had gathered in the drizzle. At each site Ms. Dagsdottir gave us the historic and literary background of the location, and Ms. Bordardottir read an excerpt from a novel, an ancient saga or a poem that involved that specific place.



Andri Snaer Magnason, a novelist.  
Credit Bara Kristinsdottir for The  
New York Times

On the street outside the library, Ms. Bordardottir read from "Skoffin," a folktale from "Meeting With Monsters: An Illustrated Guide to the Beasts of Iceland." We walked a few blocks to the old government house and heard an excerpt from a 1929 novel "The Black Cliffs." At the National Theater Building we heard a section of "The Man From Manitoba," which featured a scene in the alley behind the theater. At the former hospital and morgue (now a music school for children), we heard "The Fleeting Face of Autumn," a folktale from "Peculiar Passengers." We stopped in front of a rusted metal shack being used as a public art display and heard from the "Saga of Grettir," which is about a bad-tempered fellow from around the ninth century. Some of the stories were reminiscent of tales by Edgar Allan Poe. Perhaps extended periods of dark, cold and rain had drawn out the darkness of the heart.

"Icelandic literature, like literature everywhere, is a reflection of our society, and, for those who are interested to learn a little about Icelandic society, literature offers a way to learn and understand," Ms. Dagsdottir told me. "In this way, literature is important, both in itself as a cultural product, and as a way of gaining insight into our nationality and society.

The tours are intended to provide a glimpse into Icelandic culture and the history of the city."



The Grofarhus Museum of  
Photography. Credit Bara Kristinsdottir for  
The New York Times

They accomplished that goal. Hearing the words of writers spoken in front of places they wrote about takes travelers past the beautiful scenery. It offers a peek at the country's literary soul.

Our last stop was at the former home of Hannes Hafstein, a poet and the first minister for Iceland in the early 1900s.

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Hafstein was a reformer who urged the people of Iceland to reclaim the glory of the saga years. He also helped women achieve the right to vote in 1911. The house has been transformed into a cafe, with a library, museum and space for literary events. In the cafe I met Mr. Magnason and another novelist, Yrsa Sigurdardottir, who writes both children's books and horror novels. Both are best-selling authors in their country. Ms. Siggurdardottir read from "I Remember You," a crime novel/ghost story, and Mr. Magnason read from "Love Star," a biting novel rich with social commentary.



Ulfhildur Dagsdottir, a literary scholar. Credit Bara Kristinsdottir for The New York Times

Iceland's stories stay alive for many reasons, not the least because of its singular language and its tradition of keeping written records. While most of the nation's citizens live in and around Reykjavik, small farming communities dot the outer reaches of the country. Each village has documents of who owned what farm, who lived where, who died and how they died. Churches also have logs of membership and baptism.

"We have few paintings or sculptures older than 100 years, compared to the stories we have," Mr. Magnason said. "But we have archives with stories throughout the 1,000 years of Iceland."

Mr. Magnason started his own company, which has published more than 25 books by young authors.

Today throughout Reykjavik, individuals can sit on public benches that have a code on them, scan it with their smartphones and hear readings from Icelandic literature. Its literary scene is not entirely insular. Every two years since 1985, the city hosts an international literary festival that has included writers like Kurt Vonnegut (a major influence on Mr. Magnason), Günter Grass, J. M. Coetzee, Paul Auster, A. S. Byatt, Isabel Allende, Haruki Murakami, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Seamus Heaney, Taslima Nasrin and others.

Still, the country's voice is distinct, partly because of the language. "There is a thread of storytelling in the psyche," Mr. Magnason said. "I think the magic of Reykjavik is the culture in general and how we have an infrastructure to do quite a lot. Big books, plays, film. And then there is the language. If Icelanders spoke another language, our talent would be drawn to the capital of the language. To Copenhagen, Paris, London or New York. The Icelandic language creates a microcosm and a strange universe in some ways. It is self-sufficient and self-contained, but still very open for influence."

Like the glaciers that cover much of the country, Iceland is covered with thick layers of stories. And like the volcanoes that roil beneath that icy crust, more stories are forming, ready to create a new geography.

I pulled the collar of my jacket around my neck as I walked toward a bookstore. Yes. Definitely. I could write here. And I did.

**Correction: November 29, 2015**

## The New York Times

An article last Sunday about a literary tour of Iceland misspelled the surname of an Icelandic novelist. She is Yrsa Sigurdardottir, not Siggurdardottir. And the article misidentified the literary event the writer Barbara Kingsolver attended. She was on the faculty of the Iceland Writers Retreat; she did not attend the country's international literary festival.