

An Interview with Arnaldur Indriðason by Kristín M. Jóhannsdóttir

ARNALDUR INDRIDASON
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ABSTRACT: Arnaldur Indriðason's latest book, *Kamp Knox* (2014) [Camp Knox], was published on November 1, 2014 and focuses on the American military base in Keflavík, Iceland. Detective Erlendur Sveinsson is the protagonist, as in so many of Indriðason's books. In this interview, conducted shortly before the book's release, Arnaldur Indriðason tells us a bit about Erlendur and his colleague Marion Briem. He also discusses how he positions himself within the Scandinavian crime novel tradition.

RÉSUMÉ: Le dernier livre d'Arnaldur Indriðason, *Kamp Knox* (2014) [Camp Knox], a été publié le 1er novembre 2014 et se concentre sur la base de militaire américaine à Keflavík, Islande. Le détective Erlendur Sveinsson est le protagoniste, comme dans tant de livres d'Indriðason. Dans cette interview, réalisée peu avant la sortie du livre, Arnaldur Indriðason nous en dit un peu sur Erlendur et sa collègue Marion Briem. Il explique également comment il se positionne au sein de la tradition du roman policier scandinave.

Arnaldur Indriðason is an Icelandic crime writer. Kristín M. Jóhannsdóttir is an adjunct at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Akureyri.



Arnaldur Indriðason

Arnaldur Indriðason was born in Reykjavík on January 28, 1961, to the writer Indriði G. Þorsteinsson and Þórunn Ólöf Friðriksdóttir. He has a BA degree in history from the University of Iceland and worked for a long time as a freelance journalist at the Icelandic newspaper *Morgunblaðið*.

Indriðason's first novel, *Synir duftsins* [Sons of Dust] was published in 1997, but it wasn't really until his fourth novel, *Mýrin* [Jar City], published in 2000, that he really set his mark on the Icelandic literary scene. From this point on he has been viewed as the undisputed king of Icelandic crime fiction, publishing a new book every year—each one in turn becoming a bestseller.

Most of Indriðason's books centre around the detective Erlendur Sveinsson; a private, divorced, middle-aged, sheep-head-eating loner with two grown-up children who suffer from drug and alcoholic abuse, which sometimes creates additional problems for Erlendur when dealing with underworld acquaintances of his children. His spare time is spent reading stories about disappearances, partly due to the loss of his brother in childhood. Arnaldur's two main sidekicks are Elínborg and Sigurður Óli; the latter providing contrast to Arnaldur's old-fashioned nationalism by being extremely Americanized and modern. In addition, Erlendur's mentor, Marion Briem plays an important role in many of the books.

Indriðason's books are centred in Icelandic reality even though most Icelanders aren't aware of the underworld presented in the books. It is a part of the culture hidden from most. The books are full of social criticism, whether it has to do with the drug world, entropy in the financial system, or relationships with other nations. Many of the books are at least partly set in the past, referencing historical events such as the Fischer-Spassky duel in 1972 and the influence British and American soldiers had on the Icelandic women during WWII, the so-called "situation" (*ástand*). His latest novel, *Kamp Knox* [Oblivion], centres around the American military base in Keflavík and the military presence in Iceland.

Arnaldur Indriðason has received numerous prestigious awards for his novels. *Mýrin* [Jar City] received the Glass Key award for the best Nordic crime novel in 2002 and *Grafarþögn* [Silence of the Grave] won it a year later in 2003 in addition to the Crime Writer's Association Gold dagger in 2005. *Röddin* [Voices] received the Swedish Martin Beck award in 2005 and the French Grand Prix Littérature Policière in 2007. *Kleifarvatn* [The Draining Lake] received the American Barry-award in 2009, and in 2013 Indriðason won the esteemed RBA International Prize for Crime Writing for his novel *Skuggasund* [The Man from Manitoba].

So far, Arnaldur Indriðason has published nineteen crime novels and his books have been translated into over forty languages. These are: *Synir duftsins* (1997) [Sons of Dust], *Dauðarósir* (1998) [Silent Kill], *Napóleonskjölin* (1999) [Operation Napoleon], *Mýrin* (2000) [Jar City], *Grafarþögn* (2001) [Silence of the Grave], *Röddin* (2003) [Voices], *Bettý* (2003), *Kleifarvatn* (2004) [The Draining Lake], *Vetrarborgin* (2005) [Arctic Chill], *Konungsbók* (2006) [The King's Book], *Harðskafi* (2007)

[*Hypothermia*], *Myrká* (2008) [*Outrage*], *Svörtuloft* (2009) [*Black Skies*], *Furðustrandir* (2010) [*Strange Shores*], *Einvígið* (2011) [*The Great Match*], *Reykjavíkurnætur* (2012) [*Reykjavik Nights*], *Skuggasund* (2013) [*The Man from Manitoba*], *Kamp Knox* (2014) [*Oblivion*]. Six of these books have yet to be published in English. Of these, *Kamp Knox* [*Oblivion*] is due out in July 2015 and *Einvígið* [*The Great Match*] and *Skuggasund* [*The Man from Manitoba*] are currently being translated. There are however no concrete plans to translate *Synir duftsins* [*Sons of Dust*], *Dauðarósir* [*Silent Kill*], or *Betty*. The reception has been extremely positive, and the books have ended up on bestseller lists in numerous countries. *Mýrin* was filmed by acknowledged film director Baltasar Kormákur and premiered in 2006, and the Icelandic National Broadcasting Company has broadcasted several radio plays from his books, adapted by Indriðason himself.

In this interview, conducted through e-mail on September 15, 2014, shortly before the release of *Kamp Knox*, Arnaldur Indriðason tells us a bit about Erlendur and his colleague Marion Briem. He also discusses how he positions himself within the Scandinavian crime novel tradition.

Q :

What are the characteristics of the Scandinavian crime novel tradition and in what way do you think your books fit into that tradition?

A :

I think it might be a combination of strong characterization and realism. At least these are things that I emphasize in my writing, particularly because Icelandic readers are very demanding when it comes to these things, and maybe particularly when it comes to realism and credibility. Therefore it should come as no surprise that my favourite Scandinavian crime writers are Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, who laid much emphasis on social realism in their detective novels. Their books had a strong impact on me because they showed that the protagonist of a thriller did not have to be a martini-drinking superhero but could be just a regular guy like you and me.

Q :

Erlendur is obviously deep-rooted in Icelandic society and in some sense an embodiment of old Iceland. Have you known characters like Erlendur or did he emerge entirely out of your imagination?

A :

He is entirely my conception and sometimes I agree with him and sometimes I don't; sometimes I understand him and sometimes I don't. When I started the series about him I realized that I could not avoid the fact that he is an

Icelandic cop, even though it was thought particularly lame when the first books came out here in Iceland—cop stories had not been well received by people who focus on literary fiction. So I did all that I could to make him as Icelandic as possible, even though I didn't quite realize what that really meant. I did know that he was a bit out of place with all the changes that had taken place in Iceland since the end of WWII when we changed from a poor agricultural society to a wealthy modern one, which then ended with a complete and utter economical crash. Erlendur was kind of left behind in this development, and I soon started seeing him as some kind of an antidote to it; he wanted to stop and look back at where we came from and who we are. No one has time for that anymore.

Q:

Your books have been translated into many languages and presumably you have to work with your translators to some extent. In your books you keep the gender of Marion Briem ambiguous so that the reader never knows if Marion is a man or a woman. Have any of your translators assigned gender to Marion Briem or have you always made sure they know this character's gender identity is supposed to be ambiguous? And did you always plan on making Marion's gender ambiguous or did that just kind of happen?

A:

I've always made it clear that Marion is nonsexual but in some languages that is actually not possible. For my part Marion doesn't have a gender. It has often been quite complex to write the person in that way but at the same time quite enjoyable. It's just one more mystery in the books. I always intended to make Marion that way, and it has to do with discussions of feminism and women's literature. I wanted to create a character that couldn't be defined in gender studies, but then it turns out that Marion's sex is exactly what people are arguing about.

Q:

Your books often have a historical element, but it looks like that has been increasing in the last few books. Are you maybe moving away from crime stories to other kinds of literature?

A:

No, I don't think I am. I'm educated as a historian, and I'm interested in history and what happens in the past as well as how it affects our life today. It has something to do with the concept of time that I haven't been able to explain properly, neither for me nor others, except in such terms that time passes

and not everyone can associate themselves with it – certainly not Erlendur. Everything is subject to change, and it may not always be beneficial.

Q :

Is there anything you want to tell us about your next book?

A :

I never talk about my books before they are published—and hardly afterwards either. I'm a great believer in the reader getting to discover the stories for him- or herself without any kind of guidance or prior clarifications from the author.

And with that we thank Arnaldur for his precious time and allow him to go back to finishing his novel.