

An Interview with Yrsa Sigurðardóttir by John Tucker

YRSA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR

JOHN TUCKER

ABSTRACT: In her responses to the interview questions, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir emerges as a writer keenly aware of her audience and the traditions to which she belongs, but governed by her own priorities and concerns, a long-standing delight in stories of mystery. Her novels, as she says, can be divided into crime novels and novels of suspense. But they are all marked by a taste for the chilling, a characteristic but not a defining feature of *Nordic Noir*. Iceland is important to her, providing a familiar but unusual geography. Her characters too are real people, but in the Icelandic way unusually interconnected and marked by a shared culture and a shared history. Though she has succeeded in creating a successful heroine in Þóra, “a very typical Icelandic woman,” she has chosen to set her aside for the moment in order to explore new avenues in her most recent books. As her answers make clear, she is a serious writer committed to exploring new narrative challenges.

RÉSUMÉ: Dans les réponses aux questions de son interview, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir émerge comme une écrivaine ardemment consciente de son auditoire et des traditions auxquelles elle appartient, mais régie par ses propres priorités et préoccupations, une passion de longue date pour les histoires de mystère. Ses romans, tel qu'elle le souligne, peuvent être divisés entre romans policiers et romans à suspense. Toutefois, ils sont tous imprégnés d'un goût marqué pour le frisson, l'une des caractéristiques sans toutefois être déterminante de *Nordic Noir*. L'Islande est importante pour elle, fournissant une géographie familière, mais inhabituelle. Ses personnages également sont de véritables personnes, mais à la façon islandaise, inhabituellement interconnectés et marqués par une culture partagée et une histoire commune. Bien qu'elle ait réussi à créer une héroïne à succès en la personne de Þóra, « une femme islandaise très typique », elle a toutefois choisi de la mettre de côté pour le moment afin d'explorer de nouvelles avenues dans ses livres les plus récents. Tel que ses réponses le font clairement comprendre, elle est une écrivaine sérieuse, dédiée à l'exploration de nouveaux défis narratifs.

Yrsa Sigurðardóttir is an Icelandic crime writer. John Tucker is Professor Emeritus in the Department of English at the University of Victoria.



Yrsa Sigurðardóttir

Yrsa Sigurðardóttir was born in Reykjavík in 1963. She received a B.Sc. in Civil Engineering from the University of Iceland in 1988 and an M.Sc. in the same field from Concordia University in Montreal in 1997. Throughout her career, Yrsa has continued to work as an engineer in the civil-engineering firm Fjarhitun. She was

the technical manager at Kárahnjúkar dam project, a facility that supplies power to an aluminum smelter in eastern Iceland.

In 1998, unhappy with the children's books available to her own children, she wrote her first: *þar lágu Danir í því* [Trouble Afoot for the Danes]. *Við viljum jólin í júlí* [We Want Christmas in July] came out in 1999, *Barnapiúbófinn, búkolla og bókkarránið* [The Babysitter Bandit and the Book Robbery] in 2000. *B 10* appeared in 2001, and in 2003 *Biobörn* [Cinema Children], which won the Icelandic Children's Book Award that year.

Despite her success as a writer of children's books, she decided at that point to turn her creative energies to adult fiction, for reasons that she discusses in the interview below. The first fruits of this redirection came out in 2005. Since then she has written a further nine novels, all of which are usually classified by book sellers as either crime fiction or thrillers:

Þriðja táknið (2005) [*Last Rituals: A Novel of Suspense* 2007]. Trans. Bernard Scudder (Þóra Guðmundsdóttir #1)

Sér grefur gröf (2006) [*My Soul to Take: A Novel of Iceland* 2009]. Trans. Bernard Scudder and Anna Yates (Þóra Guðmundsdóttir #2)

Aska (2007) [*Ashes to Dust: A Thriller* 2010]. Trans. Philip Roughton (Þóra Guðmundsdóttir #3)

Auðnin (2008) [*The Day is Dark* 2011]. Trans. Philip Roughton (Þóra Guðmundsdóttir #4)

Horfðu á mig (2009) [*Someone to Watch over Me: A Thriller* 2013]. Trans. Philip Roughton (Þóra Guðmundsdóttir #5)

Ég man þig (2010) [*I Remember You: A Ghost Story* 2012]. Trans. Philip Roughton

Brakið (2011) [*The Silence of the Sea* 2014]. Trans. Victoria Cribb (Þóra Guðmundsdóttir #6)

Kuldi (2012) [The Undesired]

Lygi (2013) [The Exchange]

DNA (2014).

On the strength of these novels, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir is often referred to as the Queen of Icelandic Crime Fiction, a title more contested than non-Icelanders might suppose. Outside Iceland her books are frequently marketed—to the annoyance of some readers, who dispute the aptness of the comparison—as Iceland's answer to Stieg Larsson. A best-selling author in Iceland, she has become a favourite crime novelist for many non-Icelandic readers. A search of WorldCat reveals that Yrsa Sigurðardóttir has enjoyed an extraordinary success. Apart from numerous Icelandic editions of her works, it is clear that they are enormously

popular in English- and German-speaking countries, as well as in Denmark. As well her works are widely available in French, Italian, and Polish. They have also been translated into Dutch, Swedish, Finnish, Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, Slovenian, Czech, Turkish, Romanian, and Hungarian, among other languages.

The following interview was conducted by e-mail in early 2015.

Q :

You were already a successful author of children's stories when you decided to take up writing crime fiction. What motivated this decision and how did you go about training yourself to write within a new genre? Which earlier writers provided the most compelling models for you?

A :

The reason that I decided to stop writing for children and move on to novels for adults related to the subject matter of my children's books. These were humour-based and being funny is very difficult. Humour is a fine line and it is very easy to either be not funny at all or ridiculous. On top of that when writing for children one must also be very careful not to invade their innocence as the worst thing imaginable to me was that a child would read my text and become a worse person than before he or she picked the book up. So I had to juggle a captivating storyline with being entertaining and funny while keeping in mind that my readers were not as jaded as me, the adult.

The decision to write crime after putting children's books to one side was an easy one. I wanted to write a book that I would like to read. I like thrillers and crime fiction so it felt right to focus on this genre. I do not think writers can do any justice to a genre that they do not enjoy or love. One must understand, enjoy, and respect the subject matter one is dealing with when writing a story, no matter what the genre. To make the shift I did not undertake any special training or research. I just sat down and started to write once I had the story set out in my head. I got into writing due to my longstanding love affair with reading and believe my writing skills are acquired through endless hours spent with a book.

The change from writing for children to writing for adults was nearly effortless. The particular challenges one faces in writing for each group are really not that different. For both one must provide a set of characters, a premise, and a good solid story or plot, so the difference is less than many would think.

The writers that have inspired me are numerous. Some I read long before I even considered writing, but they have remained with me, some providing occasional influences and others serving as full-scale models. As a child I loved

Astrid Lindgren, Enid Blyton, Henri Verne, and Laura Ingalls Wilder as well as anything with a mummy in it, a curse, or a ghost. During adolescence I read Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie, and numerous classical romance novels. From there I moved on to reading very tough and depressing classics: Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy to name a few but soon realized this was not my cup of tea. This was followed by a period when I read every single horror novel in publication, and finally I settled on crime fiction as my favourite, although various other books are still known to land on my nightstand.

To summarize, I have been reading since I was a small child and think my writing has been incrementally influenced from the first book that I stuttered my way through to the one I have just put down. It is very hard to pinpoint any one author or any one book out of the thousands under my belt as being more influential than the next.

Q:

I have used the term “crime fiction” to identify the genre in which you write. Would this be your preferred English label? Novels of suspense also suggests itself, especially since *Last Rituals*, at least in English, bears the designation “A novel of suspense.” Alternatively might they be called detective novels? Perhaps this is a way of asking where you would locate yourself within the spectrum of novels that share the various alternative designations just proposed.

A:

I have a very clear idea of the difference between a crime novel and a novel of suspense. In a crime novel, the story begins with the worst having happened and it moves towards a better place when all or next to all has been settled, albeit with some awfulness along the way. In a suspense story the beginning is a good place with the worst yet to happen, the suspense being generated by the question: is it going to happen or is it not going to happen? If I were to classify my books within the two categories I would place most of the Þóra books in the former category, i.e., crime novels—aside from the last one in the series to date, *Silence of the Sea*, which has strong suspense elements. My standalone novels are also a mix of suspense and crime, something that has appealed to me since writing *I Remember You*, which is from the third category, i.e., a pure-blown ghost story. On the whole, I would however classify myself as a crime-writer.

Q :

Reviewers often seem to focus on the “chilling” quality that characterizes your stories. Is this a quality that you aim for, and, if so, what are the means by which you achieve it? Is it a matter of the brutality of crimes? The innocence of the victims? The brief presentation of a criminal act, sometimes from the victim's perspective, embedded within the larger story of detection?

A :

I am a very big fan of anything “chilling.” This certainly affects the way I write my books, which is to be expected given that I always try to write books that would appeal to me as a reader. I do not achieve this chilling quality by brutality or wallowing in extended descriptions of pain and hurt being inflicted. Implication is a far more effective way of creating the chilling and the creepy. With respect to the innocence of the victims I find it much more interesting when a murder or other horrid event involves them. I do not care as much when bad people are hurt and think I would write with less enthusiasm about their demise.

Q :

Would you regard “chillingness” as a defining feature of Nordic Noir? You are regarded as a significant contributor to this literary phenomenon, a phenomenon that non-Scandinavians may find curious given the relative paucity of crime in Scandinavia, as you yourself noted in a lecture at the University of Victoria. Is your writing informed by a sense of being part of a larger enterprise, one that has an important effect on the marketing of the works that belong to it? Do the various exponents of Nordic Noir constitute a writing community?

A :

I think it would be safe to say that “chillingness” is one of the defining features of Nordic Noir. These books tend to take place in cold climates during dark winter and these two elements alone suffice to provide enough ingredients for a chilling tale if the author is so inclined. This being said, I think there is more width to Nordic Noir than is sometimes supposed. So books belonging to this group contain a variety of specific elements; nevertheless such books are more likely to address the subject matter from a social perspective than crime novels from other areas.

When I am writing I do not for one second consider that I belong to Nordic Noir or that I am classified as a writer from the genre. I write what I want to write, in my own way, which is possibly or probably influenced by my origins.

To date I have not come across a specific Nordic Noir writing community; when I go to crime fiction conventions or festivals I have the sense that the whole group of crime authors from all over belong to a crime fiction family of sorts. There is great camaraderie among us, and the individual authors mingle without any sense of competition or conquest.

Q:

One of the grounds of the success of Nordic Noir is the exploration of a physical and social geography that is unfamiliar (and interesting) to non-Scandinavian readers. Your world is of course Iceland—or more accurately “Iceland,” by which I mean the place as mediated by your imagination. Would you agree that this mediation is significant? Would you regard your Iceland as essentially the same as or different from that of Arnaldur Indriðason?

A:

My Iceland is probably peppered with the parts and sections of the country and the society that intrigue me or hold my fascination in one way or another. This is highly significant as all places, not only Iceland, can be perceived differently by different people. I have always been fascinated by all things horrid which has certainly had an influence on my writing and the descriptive detail I provide. In addition my job as an engineer gives me a particular perspective on the human experience and the way I depict it. Engineers confront the world through technology, numbers, energy, strength, budgets, and progress; they engage in meetings, face the pressure of schedules and deadlines, and so on. Other writers with different training will have insight into layers of the community that I am less interested in. My Iceland is thus different from that of Arnaldur Indriðason’s; his viewpoint is that of a man, mine a woman’s if nothing else. I do not often address the lower levels of society and by that I mean the so-called underworld of criminals. My murderers are regular people—something that I find more challenging, motivating, and credible. The local underworld here is not capable of interesting murderers; when these occur they are always committed under the influence and are mainly pathetically sad.

Instead of drug-dealing and petty crimes, I prefer that the interaction between my characters leading up to ill deeds takes into account the closeness of people here. Where six degrees of separation applies to most of the world’s inhabitants, in Iceland it is probably only one degree of separation. Or zero. This provides a great tool for crime and thriller writing as my plots tend to revolve around the minor and major clashes between people. What better

than to have everyone know, or know of, everyone else? How hard would you fight to keep your ugliest secrets secret under such circumstances?

Q :

If the titles of the English translations of your novel is to be relied on, only *My Soul to Take* bears the designation “A Novel of Iceland.” Would it be true to say that it is the most Icelandic of your novels? And might that mean the most saga-like of your novels? By saga-like I mean in its setting, not the city but two curiously/carefully named farms on Snæfellsnes—itsself a uniquely appropriate location for a New Age spa. Saga-like also in the multi-generational narrative in which the sins of the distant past haunt the present and the bewilderingly large cast of unfamiliarly named characters, whose genealogies determine their behaviour. The first killing is precisely the kind proscribed by the sagas, one that is hidden. Everything flows from it.

A :

If I were to pick which of my novels are the most Icelandic then *My Soul to Take* would be high up on the list. So would *Ashes to Dust* with the Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands) setting and the fishing industry angle. But *My Soul to Take* contains references to the folklore and the history of the past century so I think it does deserve the “novel of Iceland” branding. However, this being said, I do recall having been very annoyed when I saw that designation on the cover as to me it was a crime novel, not a novel about Iceland. I am actually still a bit annoyed by these words.

Q :

The Silence of the Sea, conversely, might be described as the least Icelandic, though you speak of it as exploring the Icelandic economic crash—the Kreppa, which happens to be the name of one of the farms just mentioned. This novel seems rather to be a tour de force, an engineering problem that you set yourself: how might it realistically come to pass that a boat arrived in Iceland with no one on board. This requires multiple crimes, some of which transpire within a crime narrative that unfolds piecemeal within a subsequent detection narrative. To sustain suspense the narrative consciousness within the crime sequence attaches largely to a character who—as we learn late in the novel—has committed a crime that will cost him his life. Chillingly, to return to an earlier point, the story includes children, not a given when a yacht is being transported to Iceland.

A :

As I have already mentioned, ever since I was a child I have been intrigued by strange and mysterious stories. One of those stories is the mystery about what happened to the crew and passengers of the *Marie Celeste* in the later 1800s—a brigantine found abandoned in good condition under full sails in the Atlantic. Everyone on board had disappeared without any explanation, amongst them the young daughter of the captain and his wife. I wanted to write a modern day disappearance story in that precise vein—although unlike such stories in real life, mine comes with an explanation at the end. I very much enjoyed writing it.

Q :

It is the usual practice for crime fiction writers to create a sleuth (sometimes with a partner) who appears in all their crime novels. Even if authors would rather avoid such a strategy, readers would demand it. From your point of view, is this a happy necessity? Does having such a character to hand simplify writing (by opening up familiar paths) or make it more difficult (by limiting your creative choices)? The presence of Þóra's children, who seem up to a point to mirror your own, enforces temporal unfolding in the larger story of Þóra's that runs through the Þóra novels. Presumably this pattern will continue, and will continue to be echoed in your dedications?

A :

Having a sidekick provides many positive aspects that simplify the process of getting your ideas across to the reader and aiding the movement of the story forward. If not for a sidekick, the protagonist would do a lot of thinking about the circumstances of the story—annoyingly so. It also provides the opportunity of a different viewpoint, and thus less eureka moments for the protagonist that would come out of the blue just as in real life people tend to fixate on ideas and lose sight of other possibilities quite quickly.

Þóra's children are what make her a realistic character. She was always meant to be a very typical Icelandic woman and as such she would have a hectic life, juggling family and her job and trying to do the best she can while making sure not to take life too seriously. Her children mirror my own in some ways, possibly because it is a safe bet to write what you know and also because life mirrors fiction such as in the case of my son who decided to follow in Þóra's son's footsteps and make me a young grandmother. Unplanned he thus provided me with a grandson to love and also to observe for research for the books—but mostly to love.

Q:

Your decision to make Þóra a divorced mother has allowed you to introduce a non-Icelandic romantic interest, Matthew. Would it be true to say that the creation of Matthew signaled a desire from the first to reach a non-Icelandic audience since he can stand in for the confused foreign reader lacking local knowledge? In the event, your novels have proved extremely successful outside of Iceland. Which audience, the Icelandic or the foreign, is chiefly on your mind when you write? Does trying to satisfy both create challenges for you?

A:

Matthew was not in the book in the hope that he would appeal to foreign readers at all. He was the result of a trap that I fell into, much the same as the original Icelandic crime writers dating back to the early 1900s that always made the bad guy a foreigner. They did this because they found it inconceivable that their countrymen could be cold-hearted, planning, and plotting killers. For a little bit different reason but one along the same vein, I did not find the story credible unless it had a foreign angle, i.e., that in some way foreigners were involved in the story. Matthew was never supposed to be in the series except for that first book. He was never to appear again after being left high and dry in the hotel room at the end of the book.

However, when the novel sold to various publishers in Europe before I began book two, I realized that he would be a useful tool to ask the questions that my foreign readers would need answering but my Icelandic readers would not. So I kept him in, despite not being all too fond of him. In book three I skipped him—sent him back home—but my female readers did not like this one bit, and I got a bad conscience and brought him back—after having him study Icelandic so that he would be easier to write about. But he is a bit unlucky, he got a job at a bank in one book and then the banks collapsed soon after publication so he was out of a job. I am not sure now if I like him or not.

Q:

Could you comment on your decision to make your investigator Þóra Guðmundsdóttir a lawyer rather than a private detective or policewoman? You have explained that you consider these latter roles sufficiently explored and that making your heroine a lawyer created new possibilities for you. Though the intricacies of the law are not your focus, this certainly seems to be the case. But providing Þóra with the information she needs in her investigations requires some ingenious plotting on your part and involves

her in situations that strain your naturalistic style. Have you ever had second thoughts about Þóra?

A :

I have not written a Þóra book since the publication of *Silence of the Sea* in Iceland in 2011. Instead I have written two standalone crime/suspense novels and the first book in a new series involving two protagonists, a cop and a psychologist. The reason I have not taken up the Þóra series for so long is related to her occupation and her family life. Her occupation makes her involvement in crime complex, she does not have the same access to evidence and witnesses as the police, and her clients either have to have been charged with murder for her to enter the frame or to employ her services for some secondary reason that is often hard to set up convincingly. With regard to her personal life, I found it had almost reached the point where any more ups and downs would be unrealistic, and I therefore decided it would be good to take a break. We will see what the future holds for Þóra— the one thing I do know is that the series has been purchased for English language television, so she will at some point be taking on a life of her own that has little to do with me in some ways.

Q :

A final question: do you see the genres in which you find your narrative home evolving? Or do you believe, as some would have it, that there are no new stories (or story types), only different ways of shaping them?

A :

I think that the crime fiction genre for one will slowly move away from the ever-increasing gore as there are limits to how much of this a reader can take on without becoming so jaded that the effect falls flat. This is my hope at least, in particular as the characters that are the typical victims in such novels are usually women. Regarding the limits to new stories, I think there are no boundaries in this respect although it might be argued that much of literature is reshaping older story types. Whatever the academic conclusion is on that I do not think it matters as long as new stories feel new and provide people with quality entertainment, as well as food for thought.