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TRUTH AND TESTIMONIES THE YEAR IN ICELAND

GUNNTHORUNN GUDMUNDSOTTIR

In 2016 incursions of the “real” were very much in evidence in Icelandic cultural life. Hrafnhildur Hagalín and Björn Thors’s documentary theatre piece *Flóð* premiered at Reykjavík City Theatre in January 2016, and a related radio series on the same material, which Thorgerður Sigurðardóttir produced, both broadcasted on Channel 1 of the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service (RÚV) and was made available as a podcast. The play and the series were based on testimonies from the avalanche that devastated the small town of Flateyri in the Westfjords of Iceland in 1995. The authors interviewed survivors, members of the emergency and rescue services, and politicians who visited the site, and all were given the time to tell their own stories, reflect on the twenty years that had passed, and address their traumatic experiences. In September of the same year another documentary play premiered to rave reviews in Tjarnarbíó, Reykjavík: *Sóley Rós ræstitæknir* by María Reyndal and Sólveig Guðmundsdóttir, which was based on interviews with a woman who tells the story of her life and culminates in the traumatic experience of a still-birth. The radio series *Sendur í sveit* by the writer and journalist Mikael Torfason, also produced by Sigurðardóttir for the same radio station, tells of the many summers he was sent to farms around the country to work as a child and teenager (a common practice up until the 1990s in Iceland), and is based on his reminiscences and his interviews with the people he stayed with. Testimonial theatre and radio therefore appear to be popular in Iceland at the moment, perhaps answering a need for such works that more often than not tell of a traumatic experience. However, as we well know, testimony has long been one of the preferred ways by which we learn of another’s experience and of particular historical periods or events.

Documentary theatre is by no means a recent phenomenon and has popped up in Western culture regularly during the twentieth century, often

associated with some type of political theatre. It is, however, safe to say that it has gained new popularity in recent decades, not least, like the plays mentioned above, so-called verbatim theatre.¹ This is not the only indication of the rise of referential literature and art in our times, but one of many, including what has been termed the memoir boom in North American culture² (also seen in many other areas and regions); the rise (and fall) of so-called “reality TV” in popular culture; and last but not least the digitization of our environment with the advent of social media where users constantly express their “reality” in words and images online.³ The proliferation of autobiographical texts in the last few years in Iceland can be viewed in this context. Iceland has a very vibrant book market, with books being among the most popular Christmas presents, reflecting its high literacy levels and long literary history. Life writing has, however, come very much to the fore in recent years, with many writers, both established and of the younger generation, turning to the genre in the last decade or so. This growth in popularity has many roots and causes, which manifest themselves in a great variety of texts that have in common strong autobiographical resonances and references to the world outside the text, but that vary greatly in style and form.

One possible cause of the rise of the memoir, and nonfiction more generally, is a certain impatience with the genre of the novel in contemporary culture. The Spanish writer Javier Cercas states in the beginning of his nonfiction text on the 1981 attempted coup in Spain, *Anatomía de un instante*, that he had initially intended to write a novel, but then—because he had read in the paper that many Brits believed Winston Churchill to be a fictional character—he changed his course, gave up on the novel, and decided to write a documentary work instead (13). Karl Ove Knausgård was on a similar path when he claimed to have started on his mammoth autobiographical tome, *Min Kamp 1–6* (2009–2013) when he gave up on writing a novel about his father. The British writer Linda Grant explains in a text she wrote on her mother who was suffering from dementia, *Remind Me Who I Am Again*, that she had for months been trying to write a novel about her family without success: “I felt that the fictional characters I was creating were in some bizarre way robbing my relatives of their own biographies” (298). These doubts about the possibilities of the novel and experimentation with its borderlines and boundaries are therefore common these days. In Iceland, this has manifested itself not only in documentary or testimonial theatre and radio, but also in a proliferation of autobiographical texts in the last ten years or so, and 2015 was no exception to this. A quick (and by no means definitive) count of books of life writing—memoir, biography, autobiography—published in Iceland that year comes to thirty-one titles.

The historian and writer Þórunn Jarla Valdimarsdóttir (b. 1954) has written several works throughout her long career that are on the boundaries between historiography, biography, and fiction. She has written a fictionalized account of her grandmother's life in *Stúlka með fingur*, a biographical text on her mother, *Stúlka með maga*, and most recently she published her own memories of childhood and adolescence in *Stúlka með höfuð*. In lyrical and contemplative style she tells of her family, her childhood and upbringing, the formation of her identity, awakening sexuality, her formative years of study, and how writing came to dominate her adult life. Throughout she is very aware of the provisional truths our memories have to offer, and claims that the best outcome would be if all of her six siblings were also to write on their childhood memories: "Then it would become apparent how unique each child's experience is. Each child is on its own planet even though it belongs to the same family" (*Stúlka með höfuð* 48). Memory can thus develop a past within you that perhaps does not share much with verifiable facts. The autobiographer often has little documentation to work with, perhaps some letters or photographs, and such material can often counter her own memory of events. Valdimarsdóttir rereads letters from her adolescence and says: "I find myself in the letters and become very surprised, because I know this girl. I had completely forgotten about her" (*Stúlka með höfuð* 132).

The novelist and visual artist Hallgrímur Helgason (b. 1959) published his first autobiographical work *Sjóveikur í München* in 2015.⁴ In it he tells the story of one winter in his life, 1981–82, when he moved to Munich to study painting. He is a young man venturing out into the world, but as is so often the case, the reality does not quite live up to his expectations. This winter is a difficult one, his search for some sense of self and a place in the world does not lead him where he had hoped. The text also reveals a traumatic past, one he has never discussed before, when he describes how on a trip to Italy from Munich he is raped. (Stories of traumatic experience are common in our culture and play a substantial part in the memoir boom.) But when Helgason's work was published along with two other autobiographical works, Jón Gnarr's *Útlaginn* and Mikael Torfason's *Týnd í Paradís*, works where three men reveal a difficult or traumatic past, they were lambasted by a couple of newspaper columnists (one a prominent writer, the other a psychiatrist) for telling of abuse, ill treatment, or illness. These columnists said the texts had no literary value, being only sensationalist misery memoirs.⁵ These views were not particularly illuminating in their analysis of the works, but they were all the more revealing of prevailing views of autobiographical writing. It is also interesting to note that recent works by women writers who describe similar experiences have not been on the receiving end of similar vitriol.

The motif of the young Icelander traveling abroad for education is a very common feature of Icelandic writers' autobiographical texts, as can be seen in the works of Jón Óskar, Halldór Laxness, Thor Vilhjálmsson, Sigurður Pálsson, Pétur Gunnarsson, Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir, and others. Culture with a capital C resides elsewhere in Europe, far away from the backward and isolated island in the North Atlantic, away from its myopic view of the world and its homogeneity. Helgason is on the same journey, and like many before him, describes how parochial and old fashioned he felt when he traveled abroad. The main character, as this is an autobiographical work written in the third person, is called the Young Man, with all the references that entails. The Young Man suffers from some sort of existential nausea, perhaps echoing Sartre's Rouquentin. Where Helgason's text differs markedly from many of its precursors is in the journey's outcome. There is not the sense of freedom and happiness some of these other writers have described as a result of being finally free of their country. Instead, insecurity and feelings of inadequacy are in the foreground. The Young Man does not find his promised land. Munich is not the solution to his existential angst and parochial background, as it is a highly bourgeois city with a Nazi past. The work thus thwarts the reader's expectations of the trajectory of the young artist/writer on his road to knowledge and fulfillment.

Jón Gnarr (b. 1967) is a comedian turned politician and as such elected mayor of Reykjavik (2010–2014), whose text *Útlaginn* is the last part of his autobiographical trilogy. In addition, Gnarr has written a work aimed at the English-speaking market called *Gnarr! How I Became the Mayor of a Large City in Iceland and Changed the World*, which details his very unusual political career. Gnarr's autobiographical trilogy is very much in line with the bildungsroman, as he describes his troubles and tribulations through childhood and adolescence that finally result in a sense of self and understanding. In the first volume, *Indjóninn*, the narrator situates himself outside society and social interactions, both within the family and with his peers and in the school environment. The influence this positioning has on the narrator's identity is at the forefront, and his status is clear from the beginning. This is the origin story of the outcast, the outlaw; he is unwelcome, different from everyone else, and marginalized. Here, marginalization is not the source of creativity as romantic ideals would have it. First and foremost, it causes depression and loneliness: "I don't like being this way. I am somehow shriveled up inside and I can't control it. I don't know what to do. I feel as if I'm lost inside of me and I don't know the way out" (84). In the second volume of the trilogy, *Sjórenninginn*, the narrator describes how he finally finds a world where he can identify within punk music and culture. His search for a place in the world involves identification

with others, where maturity can happen and where the self can be formed. In this third volume, that is all blown to pieces when an operation on his penis leaves him utterly shattered and devoid of self-confidence. The narrator says that he is nothing: “I wasn’t even Jónsi the punk any more” (261).

Recent autobiographical writing in Iceland can perhaps be divided into two: on the one hand, mature writers looking back in an effort to understand their origins, their memories and their lives’ trajectory; on the other, and this is mostly the works of a younger generation, texts that constantly negotiate the borderline between autobiography and fiction, stretching the form, with reality beyond the text as a constant reference and aim. Autobiography thus spreads and leaks into other forms and methods and, of course, into other media. It seems we have a great need to come to terms with reality, to pin it down, to get it on the page or on screen, to recreate it and preserve it. This type of self-expression takes place increasingly online, for instance in social media, and some Icelandic writers have made use of this. There are also, of course, examples of people who have become well-known authors of their own lives, exclusively through social media. In our digital times “reality” is easier to preserve than ever before while it recedes from material reality and dissolves into endless binary codes. We live in times where experience, testimony, and references to the world outside the text, are valued and prevalent, and for this, autobiographical writing is the perfect conduit.

NOTES

1. For example, see Forsyth and Megson.
2. For a comprehensive analysis of the memoir boom, see Rak.
3. I have discussed online self-expression in more detail in *Representations of Forgetting in Life Writing and Fiction*.
4. Many of his works have been translated into English and hopefully this one will be available soon. It is already out in German.
5. This provoked a lengthy discussion on social media and the newspapers’ comment sections. The columns that started this were Bergsson, which is no longer available in the paper’s online version, and Guðmundsson.

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