

The Detective Novel in Icelandic

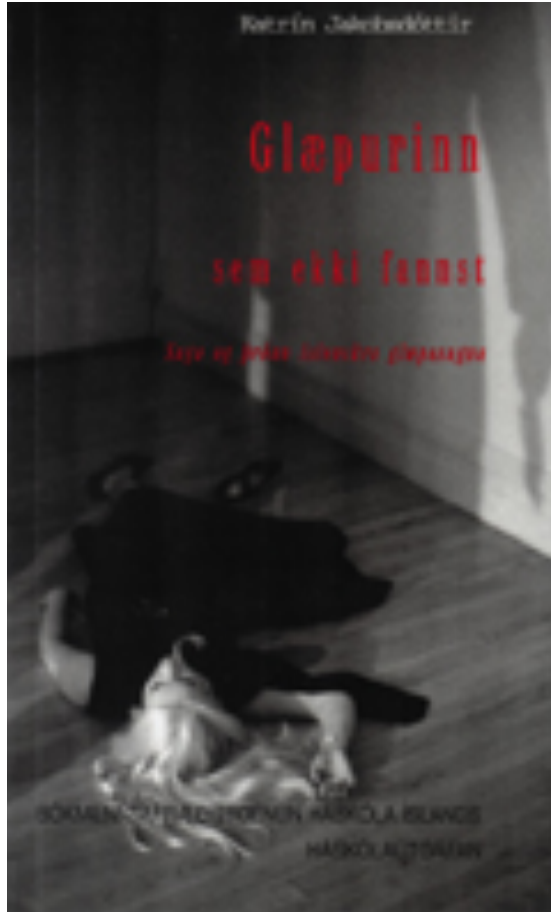
**From Jóhann M. Bjarnason to Arnaldur
Indriðason**

History of crime fiction in Iceland: The beginnings

- Jóhann M. Bjarnason (1910)
- Valur Vestan (1948-1950)
- Viktor Arnar Ingólfsson (1978-...)
- Gunnar Gunnarsson (1979-2000)
- Birgitta Halldórsdóttir (1983-...)
- Léo Löwe (1989-1991)
 - Timid beginnings, but momentum is gathering from the late 70's.
 - Main reason: extensive readership.



The Crime that couldn't be found

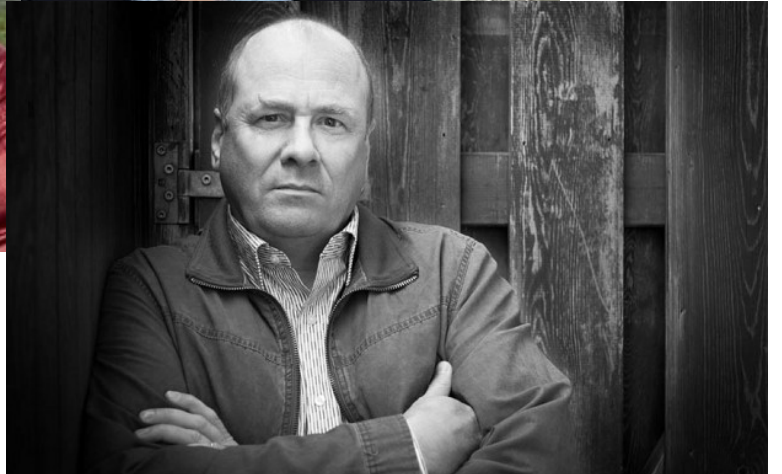


- Interesting study by Katrín Jakobsdóttir
- 2001
- MA thesis
- Complete study of crime fiction in Iceland from Jóhann M. Bjarnason onwards.
- Katrín went on to do other things.



Take-off in the late 90's

- Arnaldur Indriðason (1997-...)
- Árni Þórarinnsson (1998-...)
- Stella Blómkvist (1997-...)
- Ævar Örn Jósepsson (2002-...)
- Jón Hallur Stefánsson (2004-...)
- Yrsa Sigurðardóttir (2005-...)

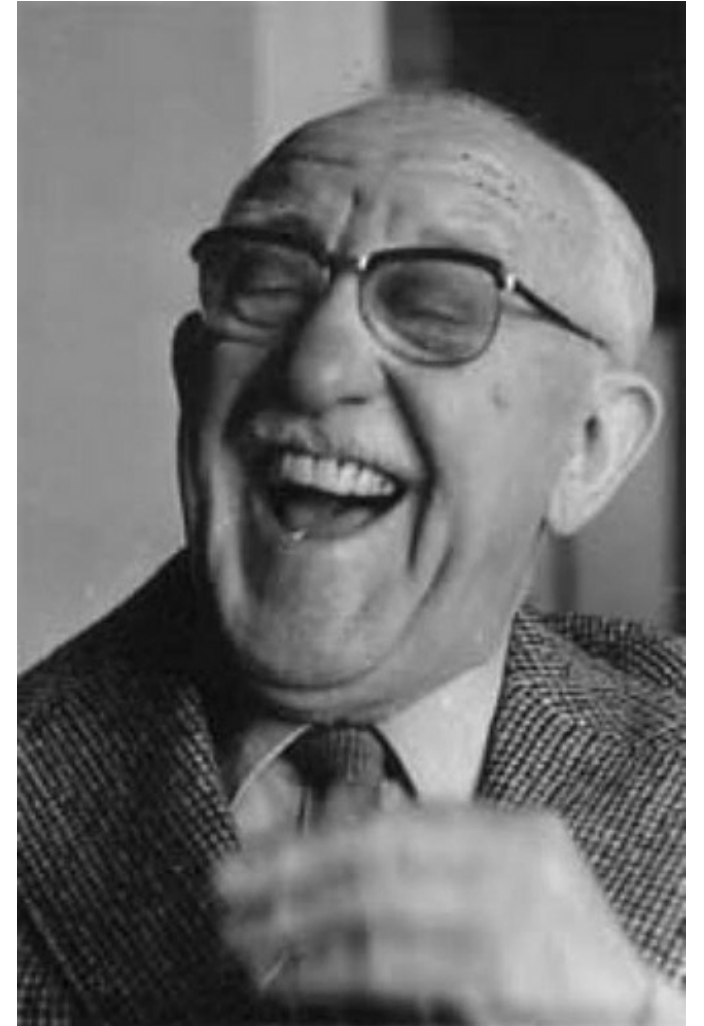


Crime fiction: a stranger in the family?

- Importance of literature for national identity.
 - Literature preserved the language and kept it distinct from other nordic languages.
 - Eddas and Sagas as basis for claim to independence.
 - The more these works were acclaimed abroad, the more Icelanders felt they should be independent.
- Literary value ascribed to „serious literature“:
 - Poets of the independence struggle
 - Their epigones.
 - Prose:
 - Gunnar Gunnarsson
 - Þórbergur Þórðarson
 - **Halldór Laxness**

60 years ago: October 27th 1955

- Halldór Laxness was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature
 - Recognition for all of Icelandic literature.
- Next generations of realist novelists wrote in the shadow of Laxness:
 - Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson
 - Indriði G. Þorsteinsson
- The modernists didn't:
 - Thor Vilhjálmsson
 - Svava Jakobsdóttir
 - Guðbergur Bergsson
- No international breakthrough until with the generation born around 1950.



Crime fiction: an intruder but also a driving force.



- Iceland guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2011.
- Vibrancy of contemporary Icelandic literature.
- Also riding the wave of Scandinavian crime fiction?
 - Arnaldur Indriðason's exceptional success in Germany.
 - Several crime writers are translated with success.

Is crime fiction a „stranger in the family“?

- Three saga episodes:
 - The mysterious murder of Vésteinn and Gísli's murder of his brother-in-law Þorgrímr.
 - Hallgerður, Mörr and the stolen cheese.
 - Bringing back the dead men in the Saga of the Faroe Islanders.



Möðruvallabók AM 132 fol.

[http://handrit.is/en/
manuscript/view/is/](http://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/)

Gísli saga Súrssonar

- Gísli's fosterbrother, Vésteinn, is killed in his bed by a mysterious stranger. Gísli's brother-in-law is suspected. When taunted, Gísli avenges his friend by killing his brother-in-law.
- These are murders (*morð*) in the Old Norse received meaning, i.e. not slayings (*víg*).
- Gísli admits his murder in obscure verse that his sister is able to unravel. He is outlawed.



THORGRIM'S SLAYING

Stolen cheese in Njáls saga

- Hallgerda has a slave steal food from neighbouring farm and burn down the food shed.
- She gives away cheese.
- Mörd Valgardsson fits it to the cheese molds of the neighbours.
- Her crime is public knowledge and she brings shame upon her household.



Saga of the Faroe Islanders

- Sigmund and two followers are escaping enemy Thronð.
- Two drown on the way. Sigmund makes it to the beach but is very weak.
- Passing farmer decides to steal his golden ring and kills Sigmund.
- Nobody knows what has become of the three.
- In a shamanistic ritual, Thronð **brings them back from the dead** and discovers the crime and the perpetrators.
- **Particularly interesting episode!!!**



Who is Arnaldur Indriðason?

- Born in Reykjavík 1961.
- Son of a prominent writer, journalist and public figure, Indriði G. Þorsteinsson (1926-2000).
- Author of 18 novels, 14 of which belong to the so-called Erlendur series.
- Unparalleled commercial success for Icelandic writer, national and international.
- Focus of today's talk: what does it mean for Arnaldur to write detective fiction in Icelandic?

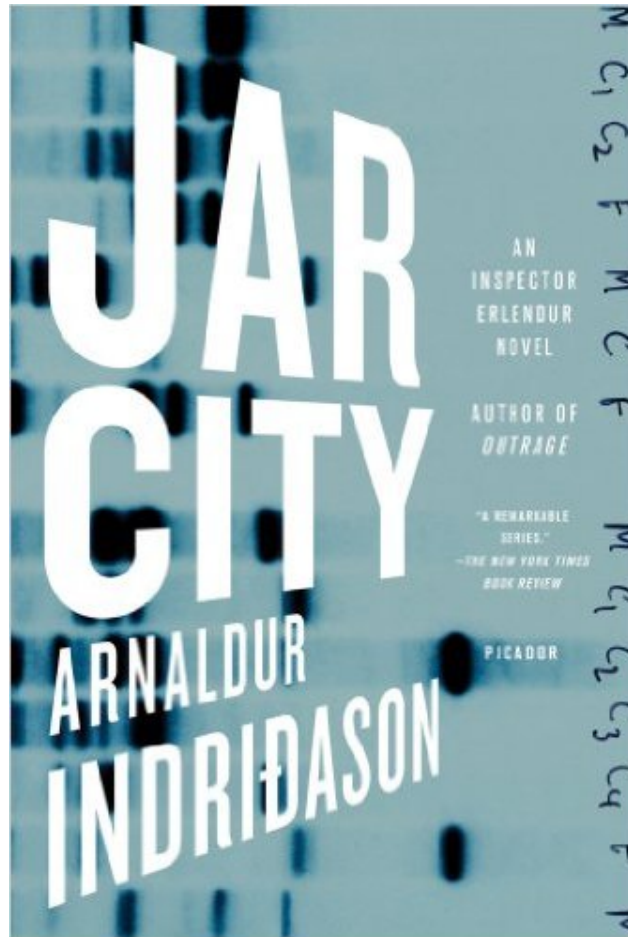


Books in English translation

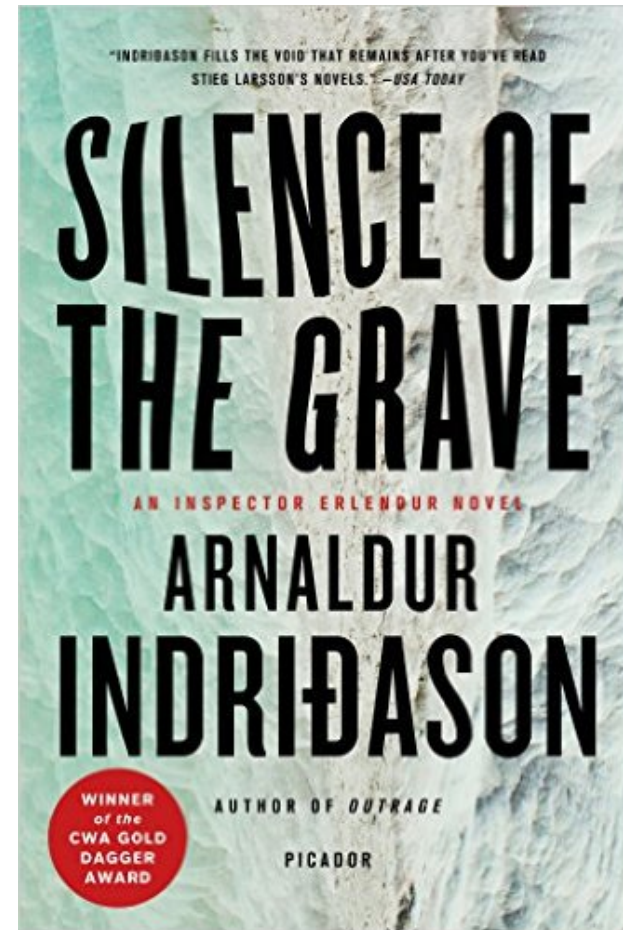
- Jar City
- Silence of the Grave
- The Draining Lake
- Artic Chill
- Voices
- Black Sky
- Hypothermia
- Outrage
- Strange Shores



Breakthrough novels: my subject today.

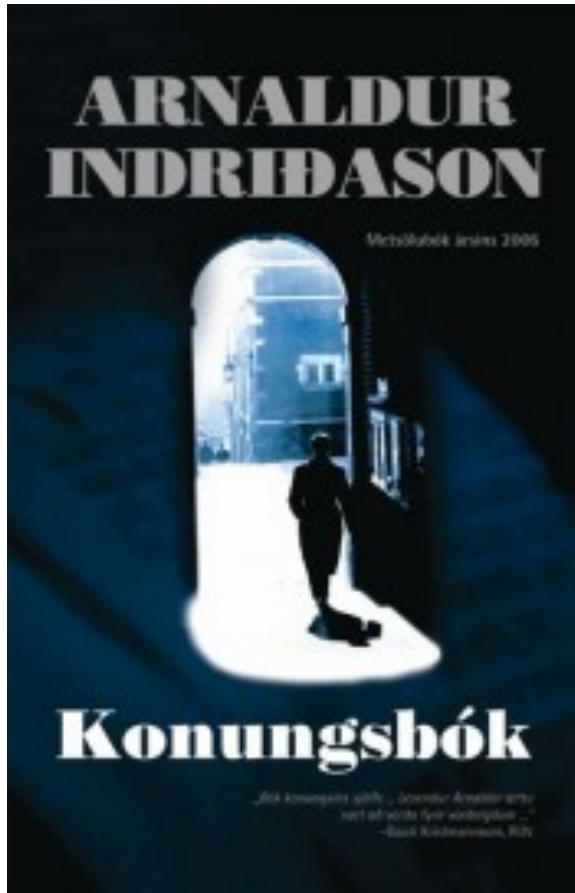


2000

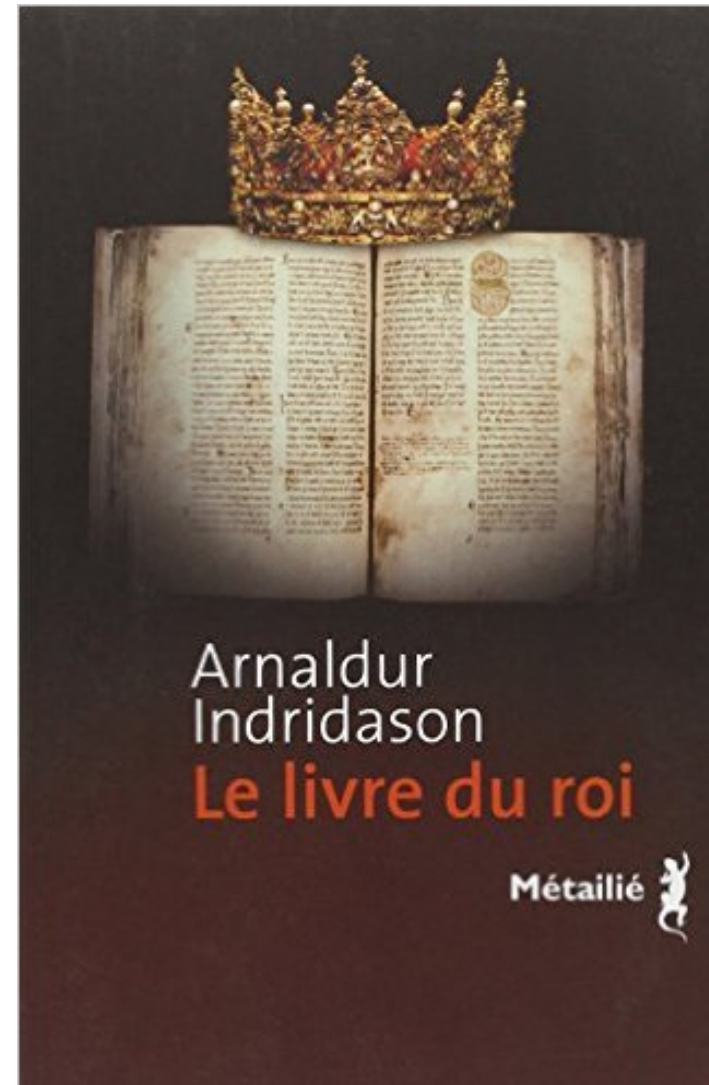


2001

Konungsbók (King's Book) not yet translated



2006



Arnaldur's background as a writer

- In journalism
 - (film critic)
- In Scandinavian crime fiction
- In Icelandic history and collective memory
- Using the collective memory: one reason for his appeal.

Acknowledged influences

- “ I write in the style of social realism and it comes from Scandinavia. I read as a young man the wonderful books about Martin Beck by the Swedes Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, great detective stories full of atmosphere and police realism. One of my favorite in America is Ed McBain. There are few greater than him. ”
 - Interview with Julia Spencer Fleming (<http://www.juliaspencerfleming.com/Arnaldur-Indridason.html>)

Influence of literary heritage

- On technique:
 - The Sagas' themes – revenge, honour, family loyalty – have been a huge influence on his novels he says, as has their style. “They get on with the story in a very direct manner, they don't bother with small details. **And I try to do this, I try to use as few words as I possibly can.** I don't think I would ever be able to write a five or six hundred-page novel, it's unimaginable to me.”
 - Jake Kerridge, Interview in the Telegraph, published Sept. 3d 2013.

Arnaldur and the sagas: Common themes

- I suppose so in a major way, my book are **all about families and relationships within families**. Actually we do have The Icelandic Sagas taking place in and around the year 1000 and they have influenced me a lot with their great stories about heroes and heroines and revenge and feuds and murders and love. The style is very spare, few words are used to describe big things and I like that. And they are all about families and close friendships in this small society Iceland has always been.
 - Interview with Julia Spencer Fleming (<http://www.juliaspencerfleming.com/Arnaldur-Indridason.html>)

Memory and fiction: Arnaldur and the sagas.

- Exploitation of collective memory.
 - Part of the appeal of the stories is that Icelandic readers recognize the material he is using.
- Recognition and distancing effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*).
 - Familiar events and places.
 - Suddenly they become infused with drama.
- The importance of the past in the present.
 - It is present in places and objects from the past.
 - It is present in the events that have shaped people's lives.
 - It is present in the absent dead: the detective's job is to bring back the dead.
- ➔ **Arnaldur does similar things for the new urban environment and past of Reykjavík as the saga authors did for the newly discovered and settled Iceland in the Middle Ages.**

What's in a name?

- „Erlendur“ means „foreign“, „from a different country“, „stranger“.
- Erlendur could not be more Icelandic:
 - Habits
 - Upbringing
 - Values
- **Bringing a foreign genre into Iceland.**
- Erlendur / Arnaldur
 - Same final syllable
 - Same syllable count



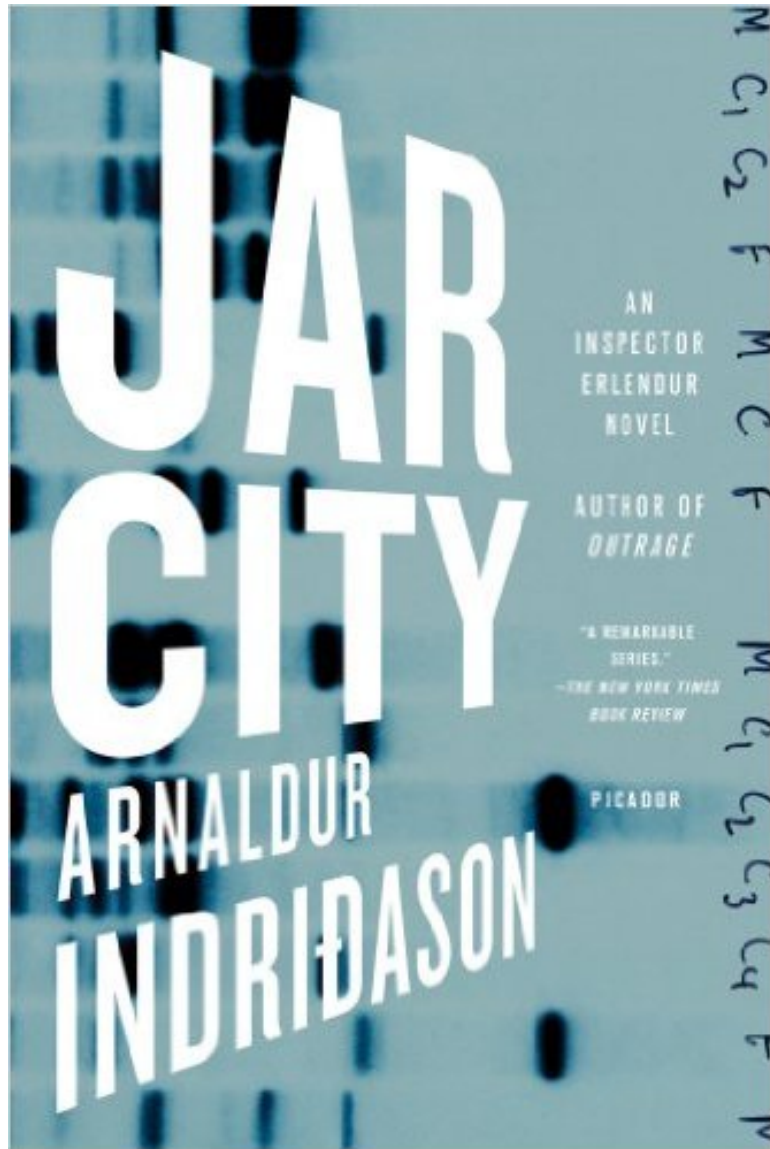
Erlendur played by Ingvar E. Sigurðsson in Baltasar Kormákur's *Jar City*

Stranger in the family?

Living in the world of the dead



- **Erlendur the shaman?**
- Increasingly salient theme in Arnaldur's work: Erlendur lives half his life with the dead.



2000

First major success.

- Erlendur murder mystery.
- Begins with a sordid crime.
- Mysterious note on body attracts Erlendur's attention.
- The victim was in fact an unpunished criminal:
 - Rapist
 - One of his victims commits suicide.
 - Bearer of genetic disease
 - Murderer is the rapist's son.
- Background: DeCode controversy.
- Erlendur's family problems: daughter is a drug addict, estranged from his son.
- The roots of the crime lie in the past.
- The origins of Erlendur's difficulties also.

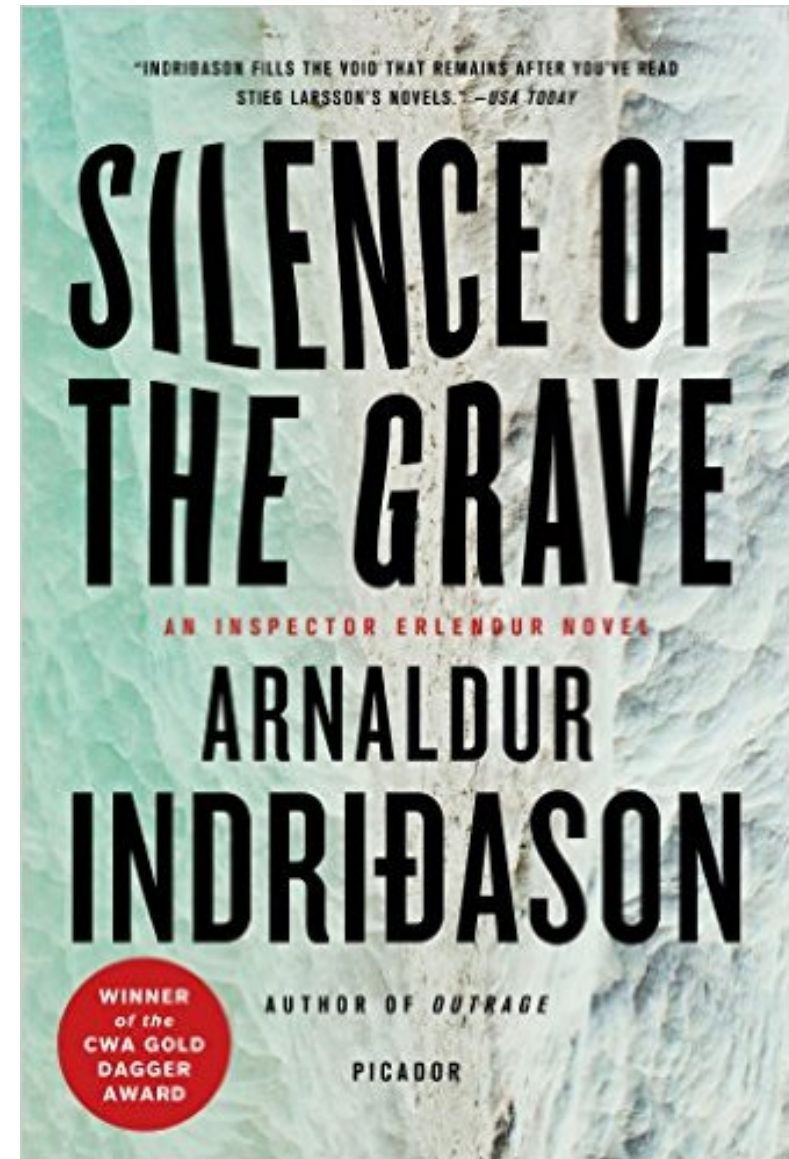
Strong poetic image

- The message tree.
- Subplot of the bride who disappeared from her wedding.
 - „He is horrible. I can't go through with this.“
 - Victim of paternal incest.
 - Erlendur is taking care of his wayward daughter.
- Iceland's genetic heritage is also a message tree: carrying information and illness from the past to the present.



Finest work?

- A human rib is found by boys playing on a building site in a new neighbourhood of ever expanding Reykjavík.
- Archaeologists carefully and very slowly excavate a body while Erlendur tries to find out what happened so many years ago.
- A family lived there, isolated by poverty, ignorance and domestic abuse.



2001

Plot moves in two different time periods

Past

- The dramatic story of the family of the past:
 - Attempts to escape tyrannical father.
 - Living description of mother and three children.
- Father engaged in black market sales of army property. Sent to jail. Happy time for family.
- Mother falls in love with American soldier.
- Father comes back. Soldier sent away.
- Elder son kills father: he is the body.
- Mother smothers newly born infant.

Present

- Erlendur and his collaborators investigate the crime.
- Excavation takes a very long time.
- Erlendur is also dealing with the consequences of his daughter's terrible addiction.
 - She is in a coma at the hospital.
- Erlendur reveals what happened and why he can never be satisfied:
 - His little brother was swept away in a terrible storm.
 - Their father was unable to help.

Another tree metaphor



- Battered mother plants red currant bushes.
 - Don't grow naturally in Iceland.
- Continue to grow after the house has disappeared.
- The daughter (the woman in the green coat) comes to harvest them.
- Love and care leave a trace.

Themes: Problems of the family in the new Iceland.

- And his long-term aim is a simple one: "I want to really understand Erlendur."
- Part of that process means understanding his father and Iceland's recent history. Over the past 60 years Iceland has been transformed from a poor, essentially peasant country to an extremely affluent modern society. It is a process that has not been without national and individual pain.
 - Nicholas Wroe, Interview in The Guardian, June 16th 2006.

Problems of fatherhood

- "**My father** was of the generation that moved to the city and he wrote about characters who had too. **Erlendur** comes from the country and never felt at home in the city. His domestic life is either difficult or just bleak. A good-looking man in his 30s with a happy home life and good at his job is a happy ending of a story, not a beginning. The study of family life lets you raise all kinds of questions." Indridason lives in Reykjavik with his wife and three children and says there are few other things so important in our lives, "and few that have so many possibilities in drama and humour."
 - Nicholas Wroe, Interview in The Guardian, June 16th 2006.

Murder, rape, incest, domestic violence.

- Crisis of fathers.
 - Disrupted families.
 - Overworked parents.
 - Children losing their connection with the past, with culture.
 - Drugs and crime.
- Preoccupation of the welfare society in crisis?
- Eternal themes:
 - Civilization and its Discontents.



Erlendur / Arnaldur

- Disruptive, destructive, out-of-control fathers.
- Mothers as victims, trying to keep things together, endless love for their children.
- Sons who kill their criminal fathers and lose their lives and/or their minds.
- Main character filled with guilt and rage.

➔ **Strangers in the family.**



I am HIM!



K. 1-6 Hydronephrosis: Nýrna-
vefurinn svo til algerlega eyddur
en geysilega mikil útpensla í
pelvis og calyces.

Original scene



- Indridason says his earliest exposure to the genre came at **age three**. "One night I couldn't get to sleep and I went into the living room where my father was watching a film on television. It was Little Caesar. That was my introduction to crime and for a long time it was my favourite movie."

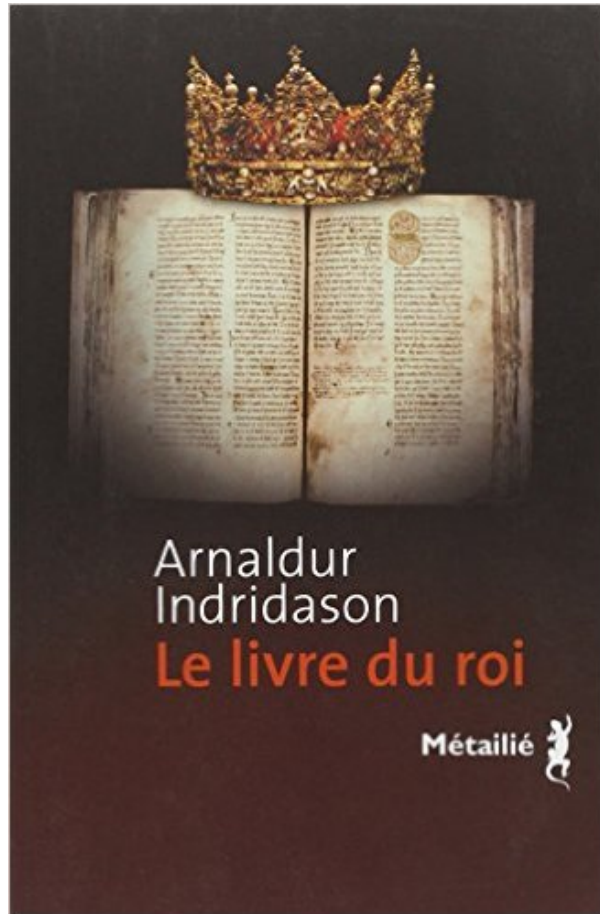
- Nicholas Wroe, Interview in The Guardian, June 16th 2006.

Following in his father's footsteps.

- "He was also an editor and wrote for newspapers so the 'tap tap tap' of his typewriter was always there," recalls Indridason. "I kept my writing secret from him for quite a time. And when I did show him a manuscript he was at first astounded. But after that he gave me wonderful support."
 - Nicholas Wroe, Interview in The Guardian, June 16th 2006.



Reappropriating the literary heritage



- Parents divorce during Arnaldur's childhood.
- Father dies in 2000.
- Doesn't witness son's phenomenal success.
 - Possible links with understanding of rage against father?
- However, Arnaldur is not considered as an author of fine literature.
- Writes a book about the most precious object in Iceland's literary heritage: *Codex Regius*.

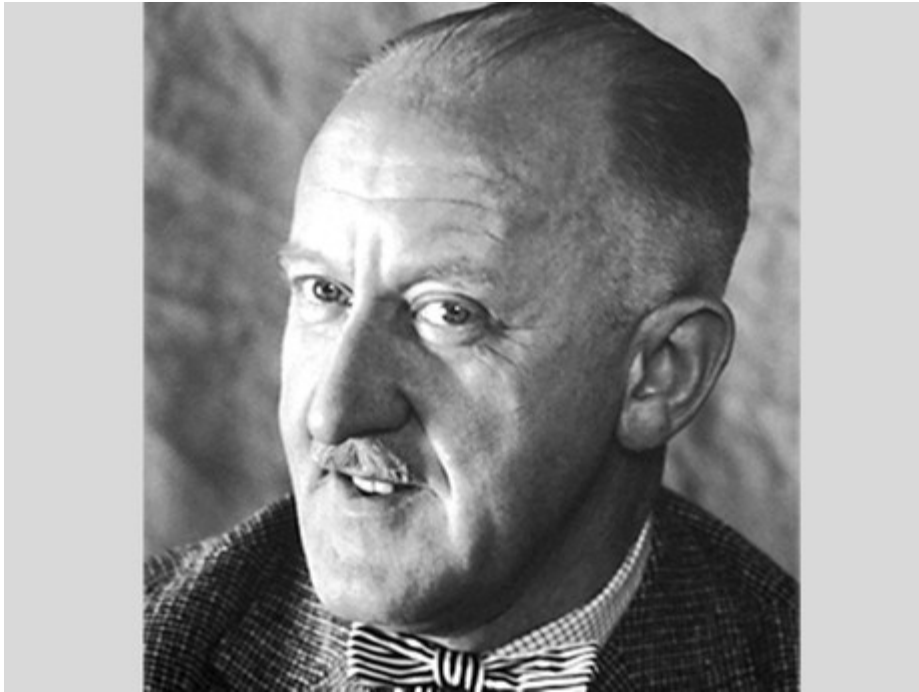
- First person narrative set in 1955.
- Fatherless narrator student of Old Norse literature.
- Old professor being chased by former Nazis who want the lost quire of Codex Regius.
- Professor has it, loses it, chase over Europe.
- Take same ship as Laxness is sailing back with his Nobel Prize.
- Professor dies, Laxness saves the manuscript and entrusts it to the young man.

Konungsbók



Who else is on board?

- Young journalist, approximately 30. He has a strong accent from the North country. He has deep voice and a friendly smile.



Halldór Laxness (1902-1997)
Winner of 1955 Nobel Prize in Literature



Indriði G. Þorsteinsson (1926-2000)

I am HIM



Recognition: A stranger no more...

