



THE PROMISE OF ICELAND

by Kári Gíslason

Published Aug 2011 | ISBN 9780702239069 | 275pp | AU\$24.95 (p/b)



INTRODUCTION

‘It would also make me realise that you only ever make your own way home.’ (p 12)

‘There was no way of farewelling Iceland, only ways of going back.’ (p 111)

This is a family memoir about a young man’s return to Reykjavík, the place of his birth, in his lifelong search for his father Gíslí’s acknowledgment of him. The identity of Kári’s father was known to him, but for nearly three decades it was kept a secret from the rest of the world. His mother Susan had had an affair with Gíslí, and promised to never reveal his identity as Kári’s father. It was a promise that must have weighed heavily on a boy who was looking for a father and openness about who he really was.

The decision to break his promise of secrecy was a potentially tragic one that had unexpectedly positive outcomes. His siblings and uncle Pétur welcomed him, his father’s wife Ólöf was hospitable although understandably guarded, and only his father remained aloof. This is a book which is as much about the author’s love affair with Iceland, and his immersion in its language and stories as an academic, as it is about his parentage. It is also about coming to terms with living in two places in one’s heart, and with having a father who will never accept that his son has a right to recognition, let alone love. In the end, it is Kári Gíslason’s coming of age story. His marriage to Olanda and the birth of his two sons, Finnur and Magnús, help to complete the process that began when he travelled to Iceland at seventeen and met his father for the first time, and continued nine years later when he decided to contact his siblings. Having children, it seems, was a way of finally finding his own true home.

‘I had tried to reach across the divide and in doing so I had become a father. That was a good result, a homecoming.’ (p 259)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After graduating with degrees in English and Law, Kári Gíslason wrote his first doctoral thesis on conceptions of authorship in medieval Iceland, and has published scholarly articles dealing mainly with family sagas. Kári has taught English literature and writing at The University of Iceland, The University of Queensland, and Bond University, and currently lectures in Creative Writing and Literary Studies at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). In 2010, he received a Dean’s Award for Excellence in Teaching at QUT.

As part of his teaching approach he maintains a blog about travel and writing: www.aremfeetintheway.blogspot.com. The blog also reflects an enduring interest in travel writing. Kári has published travel articles and essays in literary journals and in the mainstream press, and is author of the chapter on travel writing for the Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing. He is a judge for the Steele Rudd Short Story Collection Prize of the Queensland Literary Awards, and coordinating judge of the Somerset National Novella Writing Competition.

Kári is currently writing a second book, this time a novel, that continues his interest in family life, the process of returning, and the relationships that develop between the past and the decisions we make in the present.

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DISCUSSION NOTES

1. 'But the interior was only ever a feared and dangerous place – something like my father, I thought, and the mysteries of his interior life. A lost landscape.' (p 3) The first chapter (Reykjavík, 1990) describes the meeting between Kári and Gísli which must have been extremely painful for Kári. Gísli's focus on keeping the secret seemed not to allow compassion for his son's feelings. His handing over of money was symbolically suggestive of a 'payment' for maintaining the secret. His approach was seemingly brutal, but necessary to this intensely private man. How might Gísli have viewed the publication of his son's memoir? Memoir writing is a confessional for the writer, but it might be either painful or embarrassing for the people mentioned in relation to the writer. How does a memoirist decide what to leave in or out?

2. 'She would, like me, spend the rest of her life looking for ways to go back.' (p 15) Susan's love for Iceland was coloured by her relationship with Gísli, and yet she admitted that she would have run a mile had he asked her to marry him. Was she a woman whose early sense of displacement (given her father's several unhappy moves between England and Australia, her own parents' break-up, and her failed marriage to Ed) left her feeling uncertain about relationships and the demands they made?

3. Susan willed to her son a wanderlust and a love for Iceland. Are some people permanently unsettled by having lived in more than one country? Discuss with reference to the following quotes:

'We can't decide where to live,' she explained to me. 'It doesn't help if you love Australia, because loving a place isn't enough.' (p 18)

'Susan learnt that a way out of feeling alone was to capture again, even in memory, the sensation of living that she felt in those ports, how they gave her contact with the wider world, its romance, and its distance from the everyday.' (p 26)

'Places mattered, people left.' (p 30)

'She replied that she'd found her home here.' (p 41)

'Being restless was a virtue.' (p 119)

4. 'Surely, love can only ever be a good, worthwhile thing?' (p 22) Is this true, or can love be equally destructive?

5. Read more about the history of and the changes in Iceland which are suggested in this text through the following quotes:

'In December 1970, there was just a single supermarket for the whole country.' (p 33)

'In the course of three wars, spanning from 1958 to the years after my birth, they won the fisheries, and this was how the Iceland of my childhood became the Iceland of new money.' (p 37)

'Iceland was a small closed society.' (p 243)

How has Iceland gone from being a poor fishing country to a rich one? How true is this today? Read some of the literature referred to in the text as well.

6. 'I knew the school loved language, but I was never clear about how it regarded our stories, the narratives of how we'd all ended up at Mostyn House.' (p 101) What does this statement mean?

7. 'Like so many of my friends from this time on, and all of my girlfriends, he was inhabited by a sadness that

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he didn't understand, and which he mistakenly thought I might be able to articulate for him.' (p 123) Does Gíslason mean that he was a magnet for those who are unhappy, or that, as a writer, he might be able to help them verbalise their feelings and perhaps understand themselves better?

8. 'The interior otherworld he showed us was what I had created at Mostyn House, when I began to treat stories as rooms that lay beyond the control of the school.' (p 136) This narrative is also about Kári's rite of passage to become a reader and later a writer and academic. His love of words, which had begun at a British boarding school, was honed in Iceland and completed by his formal education in Brisbane. Is this a story about a writer's coming of age as much as it is about a boy's maturation and development from adolescence to adulthood?

9. Kári was astounded by his uncle Pétur and his siblings' welcome and acceptance of him: 'If I was their brother then I was their brother.' (p 187) How easy would it be to receive the letter which Kári wrote to his siblings?

10. 'His conjuring of the past was as central to him as it was for me.' (p 234) This memoir is the author's own 'conjuring of his past', for no two records of events are ever the same. Any person who features in this narrative would have a different view of what happened, and perhaps why it happened. How might one of the siblings have recalled meeting Kári, for instance? To inform this discussion you may wish to read some articles about writing literary memoirs, for example, Michael Steinberg's *Writing Literary Memoirs* <http://talkingwriting.com/writing-literary-memoir/>.

FURTHER READING ON ICELANDIC LITERATURE

Icelandic Literature: http://www.nat.is/travelguideeng/icelandic_literature.htm

My Top Five Icelandic Novels: <http://www.reykjavik.com/top-5-icelandic-novels/>

'*Icelandic issue*' McSweeney's Issue 15: <http://store.mcsweeneys.net/products/mcsweeneys-issue-15>

Njal's Saga, Robert Cook Editor, Translator, Penguin Classics

Burial Rites by Hannah Kent (2012)