

# Guðbergur Bergsson (1932-2023)

~ In Memoriam ~

BIRNA BJARNADÓTTIR

Icelandic poets used to sail the ocean in blind faith to recite poetry for kings in foreign lands. In the twenty-first century, they continue to travel; but different from the medieval bards and more in line with the current zeitgeist, Icelandic poets, novelists, and authors of crime fiction simply enjoy riding on the wave of literary festivals and book fairs around the world. For some, universities remain a destination too. As fate would have it, the University of Manitoba welcomed the writer Guðbergur Bergsson on more than one occasion. If anything, next to the University of Iceland, the University of Manitoba's Department of Icelandic Language and Literature became a leading force on the world's stage in perceiving and exploring Guðbergur's immense creativity that crosses a vast spectrum of fiction, poetry, translations, and essays.

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Guðbergur was born on October 16, 1932 in Ísólfskáli, a farm on the Reykjanes Peninsula. He moved with his family to the village Grindavík, the now world-famous town at the center of shattering earthquakes and nearby volcanic eruptions. During Guðbergur's childhood and youth, Grindavík was mostly a habitat of fishermen and farmers, and his parents shared the destiny of those born into hard work. After receiving a Teaching Diploma from Iceland's University of Education, and having worked as a cook at the American base in Keflavík, a nurse at Reykjavík's psychiatric hospital, and a weaver in Reykjavík, Guðbergur left Iceland for Spain in 1955 where he completed a degree in literature and art history at La Universidad de Barcelona. That is where Guðbergur met his long-time partner, the publisher and writer Jaime Salinas Bonmatí (1925–2011), and for decades, Guðbergur lived simultaneously in Spain and Iceland. In Guðbergur's final years, he suffered brain hemorrhages but remained active as a writer, translator, and critic. He also learned to fly and rode a motorcycle across the European continent in the company of his then partner Guðni Þorbjörnsson, a graphic designer and pilot, whom Guðbergur also introduced to New Iceland. Guðbergur passed away in their home on September 4, 2023, in Mosfellsbær, a town north of Reykjavík.

With the novel *Tómas Jónsson metsölubók*, (*Tómas Jónsson, Bestseller*), published 1966, Guðbergur secured his place as one of the chief modernists in Icelandic literature and, simultaneously, as one of the leading inheritors of the modern Icelandic literature of Halldór Laxness (1902–1998) and Gunnar Gunnarsson (1889–1975). On the world stage, Milan Kundera (1929–2023) brought attention to Guðbergur's novel *Svanurinn* (*The Swan*) in translation, (originally published in 1991), and to its author as one of Europe's major writers. In 2016, the novel was adapted to the silver screen by Ása Helga Hjörleifsdóttir in her film *The Swan*. Guðbergur was widely translated, including the tri-language publication (English, German and Icelandic) of the book of poetry *Flatey-Freyr* (2013). He was also a much-respected translator and enriched Icelandic culture with works of world literature, including Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Guðbergur received many awards, including the Icelandic Literature Prize in 1991 for *The Swan*, and in 1998, the Icelandic Literature Prize again for his fictional biography *Faðir og móðir og dulmagn bernskunnar* (Father and Mother and the Mystery of Childhood), and *Eins og steinn sem hafið fágur* (Like a Stone Smoothed by the Sea). In 2004, Guðbergur received the Swedish Academy Nordic Prize. A recipient of the Orden de Isabel la Católica, in 2010, he received the Spanish Royal Cross (Orden del Mérito Civil). In 2013, Guðbergur was awarded an honorary doctoral degree at the Faculty of Languages and Culture, at the University of Iceland.

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Guðbergur's tri-lingual book of poetry *Flatey-Freyr*, featuring Adam Kitchen's English translation and Hans Brückner's German translation, was published by Kind Publishing at the University of Manitoba's Department of Icelandic Language and Literature. The same department was instrumental in the process that led to the publication of my book on Guðbergur's aesthetics, *Recesses of The Mind. Aesthetics in the Work of Guðbergur Bergsson*, translated by the writer, translator, and artist Kristjana Gunnars. Published by McGill-Queen's University Press in 2012, Guðbergur attended the book launch in the Centennial Concert Hall in Winnipeg that was held in collaboration with the Winnipeg Symphony and its New Music Festival, featuring music by the Icelandic composers Atli Heimir Sveinsson (1938- 2019) and Jóhann Jóhannsson (1969- 2018), who were also present.

Around this time, Guðbergur visited with students of Modern Icelandic Literature in Translation and delivered a couple of lectures in the spectacular Icelandic Collection at the University of Manitoba, including the one that was organized in celebration of the department's 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in the winter of 2011- 2012. In collaboration with Canadians of Icelandic descent in Calgary and Edmonton, the department organized Guðbergur's visit to The Stephan G. Stephansson House in Markerville, and a lecture he gave in Calgary. In collaboration with Tammy Axelsson, who at the time served as the Director of the New Iceland Heritage Museum in Gimli, the department facilitated Guðbergur's and Guðni's visit to New Iceland where they exhibited photographs of the Westfjords in Iceland and recorded film interviews with Canadians of Icelandic descent in the Lake Winnipeg region. Last but not least, for several years, Guðbergur served as an annual guest speaker at the Icelandic Field School (2007- 2015), a summer course

held in Iceland by the department in collaboration with the University Centre of the Westfjords. The site of his presentation varied between locations, including Reykjavík, Öfundarfjörður (in the Westfjords), and Grindavík, of course.

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In his fictional biography, Guðbergur highlights Grindavík's nature, culture, and existential realities during the interwar years and into World War II, in context with some historic, cultural and existential realities on the world's stage. On the road to Grindavík, the Icelandic Field School participants were familiar with these characteristics of Guðbergur's aesthetics and how his perception of people's bleak yet picturesque existence amidst nature's unrelenting forces can be viewed as a centripetal force in his individual aesthetics— his gateway into Icelandic culture and society, and from there, into the fragmented remains of cultural heritage of the West. The Icelandic Field School participants were also familiar with the idea that Grindavík could be viewed as the Florence of the North, in the sense that for Guðbergur, during his childhood and youth, life there was as colorful as in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and that a description of it could only be made by the one who treads in Dante's footsteps, goes into exile, and dies far away from his Florence.

Another significant source on Guðbergur's aesthetics is a text he wrote around the beginning of this century on himself as a writer for the UNESCO programme Reykjavík – City of Literature. Evidently, the childhood surroundings shaped his perspective. In this text on himself as a writer, he also reflects on how he tried to compose a life's work that is based on his own aesthetics, regardless of the reception. Few things, he writes, are harder on the mind than the endless ocean, the barren lava, earthquakes, and villages on the edges of the world where all storms reach land. Simultaneously, he continues, seen from a certain vantage point, the peripheral surroundings can be constructive, and according to Guðbergur the writer, this outlook could explain why his work is not an experiment in evoking sympathy but reflection, wonder, rebellion against circumstances, and the question: How is a human being to endure the complex trial that nature stages in her life, in her human nature, and in the lives of others?

Our travels with Guðbergur in the transatlantic region belong to the past. Still, in our lives, we remain embraced by nature's trial and can rely on Guðbergur's adventurous experiment.