

WAR AND CRIME IN THE WORK OF ARNALDUR INDRIDASON

Daisy L. Neijmann
University College London
daisy@daisyneijmann.com

Abstract

In the course of his highly successful career as a writer of Icelandic crime fiction, Arnaldur Indriðason has turned to the Second World War and its afterlife with notable regularity. While the war has long been a popular topic in crime fiction generally, it is unusual in an Icelandic literary context. Indeed, even the crime genre itself in its Icelandic guise has a very short history and still struggles to be taken seriously despite its unprecedented popularity. This article examines the literary context of Indriðason's work, its reception and place in Icelandic literature, and the role of the Second World War in his work. War and crime literature share a number of important features, which makes the genre a particularly apt medium to explore wartime events and effects and their consequences in the present. In his crime novels, Indriðason uses the war as a framework to open up the past to investigation, uncover buried secrets and transgressions, and raise moral questions in the present. In doing so, he has initiated the process of exploration and critical revision of the wartime past in Icelandic literature that has characterised other European literatures since the 1990s.

Keywords

Arnaldur Indriðason; crime fiction, Nordic Noir, Scandinavian crime fiction, Icelandic literature, war literature, occupation literature, Second World War, occupation of Iceland

Introduction

Arnaldur Indriðason (b. 1961) is currently Iceland's best-selling author and probably its best known author abroad. He published his first novel, *Synir duftsins* ("Sons of Dust") in 1997, and although he did not really achieve general recognition until several years later, in retrospect this publication has come to mark the inception of Icelandic crime fiction, a genre which he had an essential part in developing and of which he has been the undisputed king for many years. Yet Indriðason's position in Icelandic literature is a strange one. Despite his large readership, both at home and abroad, and the many awards his crime novels have won, the literary establishment in Iceland has remained remarkably quiet where he is concerned, and barely seems to want to recognise him as an author worth serious critical attention.

One prominent characteristic of Indriðason's work is the role of history and its reverberations in the present. Many of his works feature two time-layers, with one story set in the past and the other in the present, which then either interact or reflect on each other. The social commentary in his fiction is thus usually given a historical dimension. The Second World War and its aftermath in particular constitutes a running theme in Indriðason's oeuvre,

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a period to which he returns again and again, from his earliest novels up to his most recent ones.

This article will examine the role of World War II in Indriðason's work, principally focussing on four novels which span the author's career and have the war and its legacy as their main narrative motor: *Napóleonskjölin* (1999; *Operation Napoleon*, 2010); *Konungsbók* (2006; "The King's Book"); *Grafarþögn* (2001; *Silence of the Grave*, 2005); and *Skuggasund* (2013; *The Man from Manitoba* [forthcoming]). To be able to view Indriðason's work in its larger literary context, the article will start with a brief discussion of the author's place in Icelandic literature and its relation to the crime genre in Iceland and the Nordic countries generally.

Crime fiction in Iceland

Icelanders have been reading crime fiction since Icelandic newspapers started publishing foreign serials in Icelandic translation in the early twentieth century. It is in many ways telling, however, that the first Icelandic crime story was written not in Iceland, but in Canada by an Icelandic emigrant author, Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason ("Íslenskur Sherlock Holmes", 1910 ["An Icelandic Sherlock Holmes"]). The title itself is significant: it shows an attempt to icelandicise a foreign phenomenon: the crime detective. And, as Katrín Jakobsdóttir (2011, 46-47) has pointed out, the story is very much concerned with national identity. Since then, the occasional Icelandic author tried his hand at this genre, usually publishing only one work, although a few were more persistent. The first crime story to receive a review in a newspaper was *Alt í lagi í Reykjavík* ([sic] "Everything all right in Reykjavík"), published in 1939 by Ólafur við Faxafen, which was for a long time the best known Icelandic crime novel, but it remained the author's only attempt, and its influence on other authors was minimal (Jóhannsson, 2006, 269).

Another reason why an Icelandic crime literature would not come off the ground is most likely the fact that for many, Iceland did not seem to provide a very convincing setting. A small, traditionally rural and largely egalitarian society with only one city, very little crime to boast and only a minimal police force which no-one took very seriously, it must have posed a great challenge to transpose the genre's main characteristics into a credible Icelandic environment. It is widely recognised that crime fiction as we know it today has its roots in the nineteenth century with its industrialisation, technical development and urbanisation: densely populated areas provide the infrastructure for crime and the crime detection process so central to the genre. During the first part of the twentieth century, Iceland's capital city was, however, little more than a large village, while modernity was still in its infancy. Translated crime fiction was always very popular though, despite the fact that it was berated by Icelandic authors and the cultural elite, who regarded it as badly-written rubbish which indulged in violence and spoiled people's moral fibre and literary tastes.¹

¹ A good example of this can be found in the twentieth-century author Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson's trilogy about the journalist Páll Jónsson: Páll is a writer who makes a living as a translator of foreign crime serials for a magazine during and after the war, and the novels paint a very clear picture of the cultural climate at the time, including the prevailing negative attitude towards crime fiction.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, with the rapidly increasing modernisation of Icelandic society and a growing popular consumer culture, more authors began to make a more concerted effort to write Icelandic crime fiction. Prominent among these was Birgitta H. Halldórsdóttir, who started publishing popular crime romances in the style of Mary Higgins Clark on a regular basis from 1983 onwards. Gunnar Gunnarsson and Leó E. Löwe each published three successive crime novels towards the end of the last century (Gunnarsson 1979-1983, Löwe 1989-1991) but they gained little success.²

Icelanders were avid consumers of foreign crime fiction, particularly American, but when film and video started taking over the genre during the 1990s, a gap opened up in the market. At that time, the Swedish duo Per Wahlöö and Maj Sjöwall had become firmly established as authors of a distinct form of Swedish crime fiction using the crime story as a form of social criticism with their novels about the detective Martin Beck, which were translated into Icelandic from the 1970s onwards. The development of the internet in the course of the 1990s made it easier for Icelanders to follow what was being written and read elsewhere beyond what was translated and published in Iceland. When in 1997, alongside the fifteenth novel of Birgitta Halldórsdóttir, two Icelandic crime novels were published by debut authors, one being Arnaldur Indriðason's *Synir duftsins*, the other *Morðið í stjórnarráðinu* ("Murder in the Ministry") by the unknown author writing under the name of Stella Blómqvist, it constituted the start of a new era: Icelandic crime fiction was finally here to stay (Dagsdóttir, 2001).

Arnaldur Indriðason studied history and worked for a long time as a literature and film critic for the largest Icelandic daily paper *Morgunblaðið*. He therefore saw most of the Hollywood genre films shown in Iceland, as well as being thoroughly familiar with the work of the crime writers that were popular in Iceland, including Ed McBain, Alistair MacClean, Hammond Innes, and Desmond Bagley (quoted in Forshaw, 2012, 142; also Indriðason, 2001). As a result, he became very well versed in the conventions of the genre. However, he has always cited Per Wahlöö and Maj Sjöwall as having the greatest influence on him, because of the social realism in their work, and because they showed him that it was possible to write credible crime stories in a recognisable, everyday social environment, that "the protagonist of a thriller did not have to be a martini-drinking superhero but could just be a regular guy like you and me" (Jóhannsdóttir, 2015, 131).

It nevertheless took several years and several attempts for Indriðason to develop and perfect his version of a credible and accomplished Icelandic crime novel, as well as to attain critical attention and a readership. Indriðason's ambitions were clearly of a much more serious and professional nature, however, than had been the case before (with the exception of Birgitta Halldórsdóttir), and he continued his efforts with the publication of a new novel every year, as indeed he has done up until the present. His fourth novel, *Mýrin*, published in 2000 (*Jar City*, 2004), constituted a definitive turning point, both in Indriðason's career as an author of crime fiction and concerning recognition of his work. It is in this novel that Indriðason succeeds in creating an accomplished Icelandic crime novel which convincingly

² For a chronological list of Icelandic crime fiction see the website of *Hið íslenska glæpafélag*, the Icelandic association for authors and readers of crime fiction: <http://www2.f.is/krimi/>. The association was founded in 1999 and is the initiator and awarding body of The Blood Drop, the annual Icelandic award for the best Icelandic crime novel (since 2006); the winner is nominated for the Scandinavian Glass Key Award.

blends the conventions of the genre with a credible Icelandic setting and characters, a sharp social analysis, and a clean, pointed style, all perfectly balanced. And people started to take notice. The novel was discussed in the media, and when *Mýrin* received recognition in an international context by winning the Glass Key Award for the best Nordic crime novel in 2002, it was clear that Iceland had gained an author of note. At the same time as Indriðason was polishing his craft, other authors also started publishing more serious crime novels, among them Árni Þórarinnsson and Viktor Arnar Ingólfsson, the latter having tried his hand at the genre as early as 1978 (*Dauðasök*; “Cause of Death”) and again in 1982 (*Heitur snjór*; “Hot Snow”). Their work has also achieved a certain amount of success and recognition, but unlike Indriðason, they have not turned crime writing into their main profession and have not published regularly as a result. They, and others since, have however helped develop the genre in Iceland, with some – notably Yrsa Sigurðardóttir and, more recently, Ragnar Jónasson – following in Indriðason’s footsteps by going professional and developing their own Icelandic fictional crime worlds, detectives and style.

Reception at home and abroad

Internationally, Arnaldur Indriðason is most commonly viewed in the context of what has become known as “Scandi-crime” or “Nordic Noir”, a field which has been the topic of considerable attention in literary and cultural studies. He tends to be the Icelandic representative in discussions of crime fiction from the Nordic countries, and his work is generally considered to correspond to the main characteristics of Scandinavian crime fiction, which Kerstin Bergman (2014) suggests include the following: a predominance of cold and dark landscapes, social (or welfare state) criticism, melancholic and “defective” police detectives, gender equality and strong female characters, and an affinity with Anglo-American crime fiction. These elements are, as Bergman points out, not least an inheritance from Wahlöö and Sjöwall. In her study of the genesis of Indriðason’s main detective Erlendur, Kristín Árnadóttir (2003, 51) also locates Erlendur firmly among the descendants of Wahlöö and Sjöwall’s Martin Beck, the founding father of what she describes as the “ulcer family” of unkempt, divorced, chain-smoking, drinking, unhappy, work-addicted policemen who worry about the declining state of the welfare society. As such, they are in many ways the conscience of society as well as the embodiment of social and existential angst.

Nevertheless, as all studies of Nordic Noir acknowledge, the works of the many and various authors from the different Nordic countries all have their own distinctive features. Indriðason himself has said that, from the very beginning, he wanted to make Erlendur “as Icelandic as possible” (Jóhannsdóttir, 2015, 131). This is understandable for an author who is setting out to translate the conventions of a foreign genre. It has even been suggested that the detective’s name may be symbolic in this sense: Erlendur means “foreign” in Icelandic. However, it was also necessary for his works to be credible, as well as to allow for the social scrutiny that characterises Indriðason’s works. Erlendur’s malaise therefore has distinctly Icelandic qualities: he belongs to the uprooted post-war generation that lived the traumatic change from traditional, poor rural society and values to an urban, highly developed late twentieth-century lifestyle, and is thus in many ways out of time and out of place. This, Indriðason says, gives him the necessary outsider’s perspective and historical overview (Jóhannsdóttir, 2015, 131-32). Erlendur is also obsessed with missing person cases, in particular the disappearance of people through elemental forces and natural disasters, an

obsession which originates in a personal tragedy and has made guilt and grief his steady companions.

The interest among international scholars in Scandinavian crime fiction notwithstanding, Icelandic literary scholars have, with but few exceptions, refused to pay serious attention to the genre or to Indriðason's work. There are a number of possible reasons for this. To start, Icelanders, as is generally known, have a very strong literary tradition, going back to Eddic poetry and the sagas. This tradition was shared by the people and not exclusively the domain of an elite, and it played a crucial role in Iceland's struggle for independence from Denmark. The fact that Icelanders still often refer to themselves as *bókmenntaþjóðin*, "the literary nation", is a clear indication of the important part literature has played in the national self-image. This strong tradition, however, has also meant that literature has long been regarded as something valuable and serious, something that needs to be cherished and preserved. As a result, new literary currents, forms and ideas have not always found a quick and easy reception by the establishment, or indeed the more conservative reading public. Popular literature and genre fiction in particular have tended to be marginalised and dismissed. This does not mean that it was not produced and read, as we saw earlier, but due to the small size of the population, these isolated works did not reach a sufficiently large and steady readership to form a tradition of their own outside of the literary canon.

While it is true that crime fiction used to be ignored in traditional literary criticism elsewhere, too, this has changed considerably during the last two decades (Knight, 2004, x-xi). It has become the subject of legitimate critical analysis, having received a special impetus from the so-called "cultural turn" in academic studies, which, as Claire Gorrara suggests (2012, 11), casts crime fiction "as a formative narrative for understanding cultural histories." This however has not happened in Iceland, which is surprising considering the rapid growth and extraordinary popularity of Icelandic crime fiction not only at home but also abroad, where it has received considerable attention as well as prestigious nominations and awards.³ Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir (2006), who has written extensively on Icelandic popular culture, has examined the Icelandic literary establishment's consistent refusal to acknowledge crime fiction as a form of literature worthy of serious critical attention. She suggests that it is in fact this very popularity that is at the heart of the matter. Bergljót Soffía Kristjánsdóttir (2010) agrees with her: both have argued that the attitude shown by the literary elite is based in a profound suspicion of anything that "sells well", as well as in deeply ingrained ideas of what it terms "formulaic", which is regarded as a form of "low" culture directed at an audience which lacks the knowledge and good taste to appreciate anything "better." In her discussion, Kristjánsdóttir refers to a public debate which arose when the free daily newspaper *Fréttablaðið* (4th March 2008) published the results of a survey showing that the majority of respondents considered Indriðason to be Iceland's best contemporary author, to which Icelandic literati reacted with grave concern.

³ When Indriðason won the prestigious Gold Dagger for the best crime novel of the year in 2005 instead of a British author, it caused the Crime Writers Association to change its rules so that in future only crime fiction originally written in English would be eligible, a decision which led to a public debate in the UK as to whether foreign crime fiction was in fact better than British crime fiction. See Berlins (2005)

Dagsdóttir (2011, 13) considers the reaction of the Icelandic literary elite to reveal not only a complete lack of understanding of genre literature and the role of literary “formulas”, but also highly conventional ideas about Icelandic literature and a suspicion of anything foreign that might pollute this long-standing national treasure:

In Icelandic literary discussion this idea has sometimes reared its head that the wave of crime fiction powered by Indriðason is an ugly sending into the white and pure Icelandic literary landscape so richly populated by *belles lettres*. This attitude does not only show a lack of knowledge of the form of crime fiction in general, and prejudice against it, but it is also guilty of belittling the important role served by crime fiction, for instance in providing much-needed social criticism.

Here and elsewhere, Dagsdóttir (2006) has argued that, aside from adding significantly to the variety in the otherwise rather monotonous Icelandic literary landscape, Icelandic literary scholars have tended to overlook the fact that in genre literature, too, there are differences in quality, and that Indriðason’s wide readership at home and abroad as well as the many prizes he has received for his work indicate a level of excellence in his chosen genre. From a wider literary perspective, he has also made a significant contribution to the return of social realism in literature. Kristjánsdóttir meanwhile has demonstrated how instead of “polluting” the Icelandic literary heritage, Indriðason in fact builds on it and weaves it into his novels: the many literary references in his works contribute importantly to the understanding of the plot and, by extension, rekindle awareness of this heritage and its meaning among his readers.

Crime fiction and war literature

“Crime fiction is a magnifying glass that reveals the fingerprints of history”, writes Mark Lawson (2012) in his article on European detective fiction. He suggests that there is a long tradition in the genre to explore the history of modern Europe, not least because the detection or police procedural relies on the kind of social detail that is not easily available in other documents. As a result, “good crime novels become a case-file of their times”: separate observations and pieces of evidence necessary for the investigation “can start to reveal patterns” and develop a sense for connections, developments and undercurrents that might otherwise go unrecognised or unnoticed. Lawson’s observations are a good example of how the study of crime fiction as cultural document has influenced the way in which this genre is received and how its role is perceived.

To this day, the Second World War is particularly dominant in postwar crime fiction. During the Cold War years, the polarised worldview of the era as well as the idealised narratives of resistance necessary for postwar reconstruction importantly informed the genre: works from this period tend to be structured around a clear delineation of who is right and who is wrong, with the Nazis and those who worked with them the ultimate villains of choice. This framework formed the basis of, for instance, many popular and influential crime novels and spy thrillers in the Anglo-American tradition.

Towards the end of the Cold War, this pattern begins to break down. Younger generations who have not experienced the Second World War themselves but who have grown up with its legacy – the silences, the platitudes, the conventionalised narratives – start asking questions. The critical re-examination of the war in academia as well as in the public

arena in the wake of the fall of the Berlin wall is accompanied by a veritable explosion of new literary explorations of the war experience and its afterlife. No longer content with the idealised black-and-white national myths of heroic resistance versus Nazi and collaborative villainy, the past is probed and problematised to accommodate more heterogeneous, “grey” versions of events and to reveal secrets and systematical distortions that have served to protect personal interests and power relations.⁴ Increased study and recognition of the effects of warfare in the form of trauma, PTSD and camp syndrom added to the general interest in and understanding of the complexity of the war experience and its aftermath. In his discussion of war history in Scandinavian crime fiction, Karsten Wynd Meyhoff (2011, 69) draws attention to the fact that, “[t]o describe and retell what happened during the war is a complex endeavour with many levels”, and this complexity becomes an important focus of examination. Revisited and uncovered individual histories contest national narratives at a time when these are being deconstructed and rewritten in the context of challenges in the present, such as postcolonialism, globalisation and mass migration.

This reckoning with the past happens in crime fiction as well. Indeed, the form and conventions of the genre lend themselves particularly well to the investigation of war experience. Not only do secrets, murder and mayhem go hand in hand with war, but both the war story and the crime story center around moral exploration, uncovering guilt and restoring order, and, not least, the confirmation of the delicate but crucial line between right and wrong from which society derives its meaning. Wartime creates extreme conditions during which the rule of law and order is under severe pressure and even becomes suspended altogether, circumstances that confront people with moral choices for which they are unprepared but which may have consequences that will follow them for the rest of their lives. The detection process of the crime novel does not only involve unearthing hidden stories and connections, tracing causes and consequences and locating the source of disorder, but, as Claire Gorrara (2012, 6) has pointed out in her study of French crime fiction and the Second World War, it also allows for “discordant stories” to be told “that suggest the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities.” At the same time, contemporary crime fiction tends to construct a narrative “that revolves around crimes and transgressions never resolved, leaving a residue of uncertainty and fear that undermines the reassurance of closure” (Idem, 12). While generic conventions rely on a respect for the investigator as a moral compass and a belief that he or she will uncover the crime and pursue justice, there is at the same time a tendency to question authority and the power system, and to highlight shades of grey that cast doubt on right and wrong as absolute concepts. As such, Gorrara (2012, 13) argues, crime fiction offers “an interpretative frame for the Second World War that opens up the past to interrogation and, in later fictions, to the ethical imperative to confront the past and take collective responsibility.”

Gorrara focusses her discussion on French crime novels, but a similar trend has been noted in recent Scandinavian crime fiction. Although the Nordic countries are often viewed as one region, they are in fact quite different in many respects, something that is perhaps demonstrated most strikingly by their different experiences of the Second World War. Nevertheless, reinterpreting the national war past and its reverberations in the present is something that crime writers from all Scandinavian countries have recently engaged in.

⁴ For an overview of the main developments and themes regarding the Second World War in literature, see MacKay (2009). For an insightful discussion of World War II in contemporary literature, see Rau (2009).

Meyhoff suggests that these writers use the traditional socially critical impetus of the genre in Scandinavia in order to generate historical debate, exposing conflicts and complicities to critical examination in order to raise moral questions in the present, and to offer alternative versions of history and re-interpretations of national identities. One aspect which has received particular attention is the uncovering of hidden relations and involvements with the Nazi regime, particularly among those enjoying power and influence. This focus can be seen as a direct response to the rise of Neo-Nazism and the extreme right in the wake of social pressures as a result of increased immigration in the Nordic countries.

Meyhoff does not include Iceland or Finland in his discussion, but although he offers no explanation for his exclusion of these countries, in the case of Iceland it is not difficult to see why. Aside from the fact that the history of Icelandic crime fiction is very much younger than that in the other Scandinavian countries, Iceland's situation during and after the Second World War was quite radically different. Iceland was occupied by the Allied forces, not the Nazis, and it enjoyed a great boom during these years which transformed the country. During the Cold War, there was an American army base which provided money and work but was highly controversial.⁵ The last American soldiers left Iceland in 2006, which has meant that, for many at least, the Cold War did not end in Iceland until then. As a result, there has not really been a critical re-engagement with the past in the same way in Iceland as there has been elsewhere (Neijmann, 2011). In literature, less than a handful of writers have attempted to offer alternative ways of viewing the war years in Iceland and their aftermath,⁶ but not in any sustained way, nor do they appear to have sparked any debate or exercised any influence. Not until Arnaldur Indriðason appeared on the scene, that is.

Resurfacing secrets

History is an essential component in Indriðason's work. His social scrutiny usually has a historical dimension and considers the influence of the past in the present (Guðmundsdóttir 2013). Modernity made a late and drastic entrance in Iceland, which had profound consequences for Icelandic culture and society and significantly complicated people's relationship to the past as a result. Iceland's development from a largely static pastoral society to a modern nation started in the course of the nineteenth century, but long continued at a snail's pace. It was the occupation of Iceland by Allied forces during the Second World War

⁵ The Cold War caused a profound and unprecedented division in Icelandic society. Iceland's strategic position made it attractive to both the US and the Soviet Union, and while the US had the base, the Soviet Union tried to exert its influence through the activities of large and powerful Embassy, something Indriðason deals with in several of his crime novels, notably *Kleifarvatn* (2004; *The Draining Lake*, 2007). For many Icelanders, however, the base became a symbol of much more than political influence alone. The fact that an armed, military foreign superpower occupied an area of Icelandic soil designated as being completely under US control was perceived by many as a very serious threat, not just to Icelandic independence and neutrality, but to national culture, values and identity.

⁶ In short stories: "Tilbury" by Þórarinn Eldjárn (1981), "I" by Álfrún Gunnlaugsdóttir (1982), and "Endurkoma" by Svava Jakobsdóttir (1989). In children's literature: the trilogy *Sitji Guðs englar*, *Saman in hring*, *Sænginni yfir minni* by Guðrún Helgadóttir (1983-87). In fiction: *Enn er morgunn* by Böðvar Guðmundsson (2009) and, the most radical revision to date, *Konan við 1000 gráður* by Hallgrímur Helgason (2011).

that opened the floodgates and laid the foundation for Icelandic society as it is today. Within only a few years, the country, its economy and way of life were completely transformed, to the extent that many hardly recognised it for what it had once been. This period thus constitutes a pivotal moment in recent Icelandic history which still reverberates in the present, as the profound changes created a large generation gap – some have even called it an abyss (Valsson 1995, 108) –, and the resulting social and emotional turmoil continued to affect successive generations. Seen in this light, it hardly seems surprising that the war years and their aftermath should be a source of inspiration for an author like Indriðason, who has always been interested in history and its relation to identity (Jóhannsdóttir, 2015, 132; Jakobsdóttir 2011).

In his earlier work, though, Indriðason's focus is not on the occupation of Iceland so much as it is on the legacy of World War II generally. *Napóleonskjölin* (1999; *Operation Napoleon*, 2010) is Indriðason's third crime novel. This work still bears the marks of its author developing and polishing his craft, and is clearly influenced by his reading of American crime thrillers. The story revolves around a warplane which resurfaces in the Vatnajökull glacier where it had crashed in 1945. In the plane are discovered the physical remains of both Allied and Nazi officers. The discovery of the airplane triggers a swift and extreme reaction by the American military who try to keep it hidden from everyone including the Icelandic population. When the brother of young lawyer Kristín accidentally stumbles upon the secret operations on the glacier and appears to have been murdered as a result, she embarks on a journey to discover the fate of her brother and the reasons behind it. The structural element of the novel is thus not police procedure but rather the chase, both Kristín's chase for the truth that resulted in the attempted murder of her brother and the American military's chase to prevent Kristín (and everyone else) from finding it.

On the surface, then, the novel reads very much like a conventional thriller transposed to Icelandic reality. It offers some interesting twists, however, especially when we consider its representation of the war and its consequences. Although Iceland was occupied by Allied forces, the occupation violated Iceland's expressly stated neutrality, and while people were generally relieved to find that it was not Nazi soldiers marching through the streets of Reykjavík on the morning of the 10th May 1940, many nevertheless regarded it as an invasion that had made Iceland a target rather than protect it. Neither did everybody welcome the overwhelmingly large presence of an armed foreign military stationed among the general population. Writers were prominent among those who had grave concerns about the possible consequences of this presence for Icelandic independence and Icelandic culture. As the occupation began to find its way into Icelandic literature, a narrative developed in which the occupying soldiers, originally British but replaced for the most part by Americans in 1941, came to be represented as disrespectful, overbearing, deceitful and violent "Others" to the innocent, peaceful, pure, abused Icelandic "Self" (Neijmann, 2016). In Icelandic war and postwar literature, it is, in other words, the Allied soldiers and not the Nazis who are the main enemy. This binary opposition clearly draws boundaries of cultural difference in defence of a national identity perceived to be under serious threat, and it became entrenched in Icelandic postwar literature, as the dominant majority of Icelandic authors were fiercely opposed to the continued presence of an American military. In *Napóleonskjölin*, Indriðason builds on this narrative, but only to start undermining the polarity at its core.

At the start of the novel, the representation of the American military forces conforms exactly to the stereotype in Icelandic postwar literature: they are arrogant and rude, they treat Icelanders with disrespect, they plot and scheme and lie to the Icelandic authorities, they show a complete disregard for Icelandic customs and law, and they do not hesitate to use extreme violence to get what they want. They in fact resemble in many ways the classic Nazi villains from popular postwar culture. From an Icelandic perspective, they are the brutal, merciless representatives of the great foreign powers who trample on smaller nations, while Icelanders are their victims, too innocent, naive and powerless to defend themselves against their violence and deceptions. Soon however, this black-and-white picture begins to turn grey. Not all Americans, or even military officers, are the same. Bob Miller for instance, who used to work for the American secret service and whose brother was on the crashed airplane, has forged a close friendship with the two brothers who live on a farm close to the part of the glacier where the plane crashed, and has developed respect and a certain affection for Iceland in the process. Kristín's American ex-boyfriend Steve, meanwhile, becomes her main ally in her chase for the truth, thereby putting his own career and life at risk. He is in fact as determined as Kristín that the behaviour of the military secret service is completely unacceptable and should be exposed. Through their discussions the reader learns that Kristín has always been very much opposed to the base, and that this was also the reason for the fact that she ended her relationship with Steve: she could not accept the idea of being with an American. Steve on the other hand says he understands why many Icelanders are so opposed to the base, but he also points out the hypocrisy of this opposition when people are happy to profit from it at the same time:

We're the invaders. We're the military power. We fight wars. We are the bad guys. But as soon as anything goes wrong, we're expected to save the day. We're welcome to pump billions into your banana republic, yet you regard us as no better than thugs, fit only to be kept behind a wire fence. (Indriðason, tr. Cribb, 2010, 203)

If Icelanders are indeed the victims, as they like to claim, then they profit very nicely from their victimhood.

The novel also highlights how the Icelandic postwar master narrative which places Icelanders in the role of innocent victims of a military invasion has distorted the fact that, elsewhere, the Second World War caused unprecedented suffering which created victims on a completely different scale. For the two brothers, World War II constitutes a "hobby" (Idem, 193), which contrasts painfully with the experiences of Sarah Steinkamp, the Jewish widow of a deceased American pilot who was stationed in Iceland. Steve and Kristín visit Sarah in their quest to uncover the mystery which surrounds the airplane and the reasons why the Americans are so determined to keep the truth from coming out. Sarah, it turns out, has lost all of her family in the concentration camps. Her story serves as a poignant reminder to Steve and Kristín as well as Icelandic readers of what else happened during the Second World War and why the resurfacing of the airplane is so sensitive: it is believed to contain the gold of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Icelanders may believe that the Americans are the enemy, but Sarah has reason to see things differently:

"Never forget what they did," she cried, her eyes blazing as she stood there surrounded by the family pictures in their thick black frames. "They murdered my

entire family. Burnt them in the ovens. Murdered our children. That's what the Nazis were like, and never you forget it." (Idem, 142)

Thus *Napóleonsskjölin* exposes the insular attitude and minority complex of a small nation towards the military presence of one of the great powers. It uses the binary opposition created during the wartime occupation and consolidated during the Cold War years to prop up a beleaguered national self-image, not in order to perpetuate it, but in order to turn it in on itself and raise critical questions among its readers. The plane wreck resurfacing with its sensitive secrets can, in this respect, also be seen as symbolic of a resurfacing of disquieting facts regarding the position of Iceland during the war that were silenced and have long lain buried under a "snowy-white" master narrative of innocent, peaceful victimhood. As had been happening in other European literatures outside of Iceland, Indriðason uses the form of the postwar crime thriller to investigate the stories of the past, dominant as well as buried, by offering different perspectives and undermining the old binaries.

Cultural heritage

The Icelandic national self-image is also the focus of *Konungsbók* (2006; "The King's Book"), this time in connection with the Old Icelandic literature and manuscripts: "everything that makes us a nation", as one of the main characters puts it (Indriðason, 2006,124).⁷ Like *Napóleonsskjölin*, this work is structured around a chase rather than a police procedural investigation, in this instance the chase to locate the only preserved manuscript of the Poetic Edda (known as the *Codex Regius*, or King's book) and rescue it from the hands of the Nazis. It takes place in the 1950s, and much of the setting is postwar-Europe rather than Iceland. This work thus also uses a common theme from postwar crime thrillers: Nazi art theft. In doing so, it sets out to examine critically the role of literary heritage in Icelandic culture and self-conception, as well as its ramifications.

The novel's main characters form a variation on the classic detective duo: the young, naive literature student Valdemar, and the old professor, a specialist in Old Icelandic literature and manuscripts at Copenhagen university. The professor is racked by guilt because he allowed himself to be manipulated into giving the only existing manuscript of the *Codex regius* to the Nazis. His reason for doing so was to save one of his students, who worked for the Danish resistance, from being executed, but she was killed anyway, as he realised later he should have foreseen. The professor will not rest until he has retrieved the manuscript with Valdemar's assistance. He believes strongly that this and other manuscripts of Old Icelandic literature belong in Iceland. At the time the novel takes place, Iceland had achieved full independence from Denmark (it became a Republic in 1944), but for many, this independence was not complete until the country's main treasure, its manuscripts, had been returned.⁸

⁷ As this work has not (yet) been published in English translation, the translations from the original Icelandic are my own.

⁸ The return of the manuscripts to Iceland started in 1971, with the *Codex regius* among the first to arrive. The final two manuscripts were handed over in 1997. Not all manuscripts were returned: the two countries reached an agreement that only those with Icelandic content would go to Iceland.

More is at stake in the novel, however, than an ex-colony's battle to have its cultural treasures returned. It features a desperate quest to save Icelandic cultural heritage and the ideas contained in it from being appropriated by Nazi ideology. As is well known, the Nazis regarded Old Norse literature as part of their own, the shared heritage of the Germanic race. The quest which forms the novel's narrative motor is therefore not least a symbolic one: the Nazis have not just stolen the only manuscript of the Poetic Edda, they have also appropriated and distorted the ideas contained within it. By doing so, they have perverted the matrix of Icelandic culture to become the inspiration for their criminal ideology.

While the connection between Nazi ideology and Old Icelandic literature may seem obvious, even a cliché, on the European continent, it has not in fact featured very prominently in an Icelandic context, where the medieval literary heritage has always been an integral part of the national culture and self-image and therefore has very different connotations. Indriðason plays on this contrast in *Konungsbók*, using it to remind readers not only of the value of their cultural heritage but also of the fact that the power of this heritage as the source of cultural myth can be a double-edged sword: it can be a source of positive strength and unity but also a source for something much more sinister. This message is of course one that speaks directly to the present, and can also be found in other Nordic crime fiction, as we saw earlier. Rapid increase in immigration and multiculturalism, which first started to make themselves felt in Icelandic society in the late 1990s, require a critical re-engagement with national history and identity, as does the accompanying rise of extreme right-wing nationalism. In *Konungsbók*, there is an emphasis on the importance of scholarly research and interpretation of Old Icelandic literature, its role and meaning, to prevent it from becoming once again a source for criminal ideologies, war and genocide. That this is a very real danger is made clear in the words of the main Nazi villain, Erich von Orlepp, who says of the *Codex regius* manuscript:

Its value for those of us who believe in a new Germany cannot be described. We have an interested buyer who envisions a great role for the book when the time comes, when the climate will once again be receptive. (Idem, 348)⁹

The professor himself meanwhile is not an unambiguous character either: his obsession with retrieving the manuscript leads him to commit morally questionable acts, including lying, theft and grave-robbing: "The only thing that matters is the King's book", as he himself says (Idem, 192). The stereotypical Icelandic innocence, conventionally pitched against the deviousness and violence of a larger and more powerful Other, also takes on a slightly different meaning in the case of the professor: if he had been less naive, he would have realised that the Nazis were not to be trusted and he would not have been so careless as to draw their attention to the manuscript to begin with.

The novel thus addresses many of the same issues that we find in other crime fiction dealing with the wartime past, but adapted to specifically Icelandic conditions: it critically

⁹ Gísli Sigurðsson (2007) explicitly points to this in an article which appeared in the national daily newspaper *Morgunblaðið* shortly after *Konungsbók* was first published and has since been reprinted as an epilogue to the paperback edition, but this point has elicited little attention. I would like to thank translator Melanie Adams for her help with some particularly tricky parts in the translation of this passage from *Konungsbók*.

examines connections with the Nazis, it deals with wartime guilt and moral conflict, and it provides an alternative perspective on an idealised cultural identity. Unusual in Icelandic fiction, certainly up until very recently, there is a strong international dimension to this novel which contributes considerably to its impact: by exposing Icelandic characters to war experiences in a continental European context, it brings those issues that have been part of the European war legacy closer to an Icelandic readership, while the transposition of Icelandic concerns to the continent places them in a new light.

As is the case in recent literature of the Second World War elsewhere, there is a clear tendency to portray the effects of war in a more heterogeneous manner in the novel. Although the main Nazi characters are irredeemably (and slightly cartoonishly) evil, the portrayal of German people generally is much more varied. As Valdemar and the professor travel across Germany, East and West, in search of the manuscript, they encounter a country in ruins. Many have lost everything, family and loved ones as well as all possessions, whole cities have been destroyed, women raped and mutilated by Russian as well as Allied soldiers. When Valdemar asks Frau Bauer, an old friend of the professor, whether she and her husband were Nazis, she replies: “We realised too late” (Idem, 199), and says angrily: “Of course we can blame ourselves! As if I don’t know that!” (Idem, 196). The portrayal adds to a diverse and complex representation of the war and its consequences. No-one is entirely innocent – indeed, innocence is hardly a virtue in war, as the case of the professor shows.

Another warning contained in the novel, with a clear nod to very recent developments, is that cultural heritage is the property of the people and should never become a trade commodity. In this respect, one could say that the novel warns against capitalism as much as it does against Nazism, particularly against those who use the power of money to obtain for themselves works of general cultural value which should not be in the exclusive possession of individuals. As the professor puts it: “People cannot acquire this book for themselves through buying and selling as if they were dealing with fish” (Idem, 263). The true value of the King’s book lies in the fact that “it preserves us. It is our future. It is our history and our existence in the past, the present and in times to come . . . it is our history, and the world’s history, and the history of time” (Idem, 334-35). The cultural heritage contained in the *Codex regius* creates a continuity through time for the Icelandic people, but it is not exclusively theirs: it belongs to the entire world. As such, it is a sign of unity, something worth preserving, not just for its national value, but for its value to all of humanity. By portraying the value of the most important Icelandic cultural treasure as belonging to the whole world, Indriðason makes it a source for inclusion rather than exclusion.

Skeletons and battered bodies

In the novels *Grafarþögn* (2001; *Silence of the Grave*, 2005) and *Skuggasund* (2013; *The Man from Manitoba* [forthcoming]), Indriðason turns his attention to Iceland during the war years and their aftermath. It was at this time, when Iceland was occupied by the Allied forces, that modernity and the outside world came to Iceland to stay. The population of Reykjavík exploded and turned what was in essence still a drab little town into a vibrant city. The old pastoral society, already crumbling, disappeared as the migration from the farms to villages and particularly the capital increased exponentially. The army brought money and work and

opened up a world of possibilities to a desperately poor people stuck in the conventions and values of a social system that had barely changed for centuries.

During these years, the foundation for the modern Icelandic society we know today was laid, but such drastic and profound, even traumatic, change also has its shadow side. The connection with the past was suddenly severed, leaving many rootless and adrift. Where some acquired wealth and success, others lost their moorings. In the scramble for money and opportunity, and without the rules and boundaries of the old order, it was easy to go astray or fall between the cracks. The Allied military presence also caused a cultural identity crisis. Icelandic nationalist discourse had located Icelandic identity firmly in the past and the pastoral society that had preserved Iceland's unique language and culture, which was now in danger of being lost.

As happened elsewhere, the events during the war years in Iceland were quickly tidied up into a neat, simplified, highly selective narrative intended to prop up Icelandic national identity and unity. Foreign influence was either demonised as a severe threat to Iceland's purity and innocence or was erased from the narrative altogether. In literature and public discourse, Icelandic women who fraternised with soldiers became scapegoats, cast into the role of collaborators who allowed the seed of foreign invaders to pollute the Icelandic genepool (Björnsdóttir, 1989, 101). This narrative became so entrenched that, to this day, people will associate the war years in Iceland primarily with two things: sudden wealth and the *ástand*, or "situation", as the relations between soldiers and Icelandic women were called. A critical analysis and re-examination of the national hysteria around the "situation" has taken place in recent decades, mostly in feminist academic circles, where it has been interpreted as a sign of masculine crisis in response to traditional gender identities and patriarchal moral codes (Björnsdóttir, 1989; Neijmann 2013).

Grafarþögn constitutes the first sustained, powerful challenge in Icelandic literature to the "situation" discourse. And it is, I think, significant that this challenge should come from the margins of Icelandic literature and that it should be in the literary framework of criminal investigation. A building site for a new suburb of a greedily expanding Reykjavík uncovers a skeleton, and with it a horrifying story of violence and abuse going back to the occupation period. Indriðason returns to the period and the "situation" between soldiers and Icelandic women in *Skuggasund*, where the discovery of a dead body in the present leads back to the unsolved murder of a young woman during the war years. Both novels thus feature two time layers: with the discovery of a body, memories are triggered, and the two layers start interacting and become intertwined. It is not just bodies that are dug up and revealed, however. Along with their discovery, parts of the past are recovered that were silenced, and memories unearthed that were buried, covered or concreted over so as not to expose what certain groups in society would prefer to remain secret or unspoken.

Grafarþögn features detective Erlendur, who himself is the embodiment of the legacy of the war in Iceland. He is emblematic of the generation that was caught between two worlds after the sea-change which followed in the wake of the occupation: his roots in a rural past marked by a life of poverty, isolation, and struggle to survive in a harsh climate and landscape, followed by a move to the city and the modern age in which he never felt at home. In *Grafarþögn*, Erlendur himself becomes a part of the uncovering process in the novel, revealing buried secrets from the past. The investigation causes him to reflect on his background and his family in the countryside:

Those people were his heroes. He had heard about them in stories of everyday life that had been told for years and decades...

He no longer heard any tales, and they became lost to him. All his people were gone, forgotten and buried in deserted rural areas. He, in turn, drifted through a city that he had no business being in. Knew that he was not the urban type. Could not really tell what he was. But he never lost a yearning for a different life, felt rootless and uncomfortable, and sensed how his last links with the past evaporated when his mother died. (Indriðason, tr. Scudder, 2005, 195)

This buried past and these forgotten stories haunt the present and haunt Erlendur. The lost link with his past remains with him in the form of his brother's ghost, a brother lost as a child in a snowstorm because Erlendur could not hold on to him. Guilt has marked Erlendur's life since, a guilt which he refuses to let go because he feels responsible for the loss. His sense of guilt and grief expresses itself in his obsession with absences: the disappearance of people who were never found. He needs to fill in the gaps, excavate their bodies and their stories for those like himself who have been left with grief and no answers, no understanding. He needs to lay the ghosts of an untold past by recovering it so it can be told, so the memory becomes a story rather than an absence.

One aspect that *Grafarþögn* and *Skuggasund* share, aside from the fact that they both partly take place during the time of the occupation, is the shocking prominence of battered and abused bodies of women. Both works revolve around the violence perpetrated against women, and through them against small or unborn children. Although the main female character in *Grafarþögn*, Margrét, is technically not a murder victim, her daughter Mikkellína asks Erlendur and his assistant Elínborg: "Who passes sentence on anyone for soul murder?" (Idem, 221). The devastating story of the physical and psychological violence and abuse Margrét suffers at the hands of her husband is portrayed as the actual crime rather than the murder. Indeed, in this novel Indriðason reverses the roles of perpetrator and victim and reveals through Margrét's battered body how the inhuman practices of the social system turn innocent children into murderers – and abusers.

In *Skuggasund*, a woman's body has been discarded in a corner of the half-finished national theatre, which is used by the army as a storage space. Her body, too, has been violated, the life it carried aborted, and her story erased by the murderer. Each novel also features a case of a missing woman, cases which were never solved but are unearthed by the main murder investigation. The stories of these women which are brought to light mirror the violence against women connected to the main crimes. Their bodies however remain undiscovered.

The body in crime fiction is a semiotic sign, a text to be read (Knight, 2004, 198-201). The violence perpetrated against the female body in these novels is connected to the role, and rule, of the father. In *Grafarþögn*, it is Grímur, Margrét's husband, who terrorises and abuses his family. He is "the monster" in all of his elder son's nightmares (Indriðason, tr. Scudder, 2005, 100), given free reign by the social system. Throughout the story it is emphasised that the abuse can take place because it is the only power Grímur has, the power of the father over his family, which the authorities are neither able nor willing to interfere with. Similarly, Sólveig, the missing woman whose case is unearthed by the main murder investigation, was,

as it turned out, raped by her cousin. The case was hushed up to avoid gossip. When she discovered she was pregnant, her father wanted her to have an abortion. She was not allowed to keep the child and bring it up as part of the family. She disappeared and her story was buried by the family to protect the father's good name. Her sister explains that it "[d]estroyed us as a family. It has certainly shaped my whole life. Covering up. Family pride. It was taboo. We could never mention it" (Idem, 193). Even Erlendur himself is not innocent: as he sits by the bedside of his daughter Eva Lind, who has had a miscarriage and is fighting for her life, he contemplates his own shortcomings as a father which have destroyed the family and led Eva Lind on the path of substance abuse and self-destruction.

In *Skuggasund* it is Rósamunda who is raped by the father of one of Reykjavík's most powerful families. When she discovers she is pregnant, it is Rósamunda herself who decides that she cannot bear to bring this child into the world. Through a network of women she finds someone to assist her in what was at the time an illegal procedure. The dialogue between the two women exposes the hypocrisy of a society that criminalises abortion while letting men's crimes go unpunished. It is also through this women's network that Rósamunda learns of another case like hers, that she is not the perpetrator's first victim. To prevent more women from suffering the same fate, she returns to the rapist and threatens to expose him. He kills her to ensure her silence, and his son Hólmbert assists his father in getting rid of the body and in keeping the family secret to protect its reputation, for "[t]he honour of the family was at stake" (Indriðason, 2013, 308).¹⁰ When suspicion falls on a poor family relation who dies in an attempt to escape from the police, the family use their influence to obstruct further investigation and destroy case documents. However, despite having been silenced, the ghosts of the other rape victim, the murder victim and the dead suspect continue to haunt those involved.

Thorson, one of the two detectives at the time and now an old man, has never been able to forget the case, and an obituary unexpectedly provides him with a clue that gets him back into action. Hólmbert, the son, meanwhile suffers from Alzheimer's disease, and after having kept the family secret all his life, he has now lost control of his memory faculty and the memories start getting away from him. When Thorson traces him and learns the truth from him, Hólmbert's son takes over the role of the keeper of the family secret and kills Thorson. Thus, three generations of fathers are guilty of hiding the crimes committed against the two women.

The violence perpetrated by fathers on the female body, against the background of the occupation, can be read as a strong critique of the discourse on the relations between soldiers and Icelandic women. Indeed, the people who discover Rósamunda's body at the start of the novel are an Icelandic woman and her soldier boyfriend looking for a place away from prying eyes. When detectives Thorson and Flóvent start their investigation and question the young woman, Ingiborg, it quickly becomes clear that she is from a family with important political connections. Her father is the official advisor for the organisation of the foundation of the Republic of Iceland on 17 June 1944. He reacts violently when the police appear to speak with his daughter and discovers she has been seeing a soldier, blaming the mother for his daughter's disobedience and improper behaviour. When Ingiborg discovers she is pregnant, she is forced to give the child away and is married safely off to a successful Icelandic

¹⁰ As the English translation of this novel has not been published as yet, translations from the original Icelandic are my own.

businessman. As she recollects: “My father demanded it. I did what he told me to do. Anything else was out of the question . . . We were forever hiding the whole thing. My husband never knew about it. Neither does my son” (Idem, 132). Thus, the novel shows the hysteria surrounding the “situation” from the woman’s point of view.

Grafarþögn on the other hand offers a complete reversal of the “situation” discourse. Instead of being cast in the conventional role of the predatory, violent invader, the American soldier becomes a saviour. He recognises the signs of domestic abuse and finds a way of removing Grímur from his family by reporting him for theft. While Grímur is in prison, he sees to it that the family is able to find some peace. He and Margrét, Grímur’s wife, fall in love and he becomes a loving father to the children – until he is sent away to the battlefield. In this novel, it is the Icelander who is the violent monster whose family has to be saved through foreign intervention.

These novels thus expose the “situation” discourse as a violent crime committed by the patriarchal system against those it was meant to care for and protect, women and children. This is done in a historical context, by making the occupation part of the setting and uncovering the crime in the present, highlighting the ramifications of crimes committed in the past and drawing attention to crimes still committed to women in the present. But there is also a literary historical context, where the connection becomes much more personal. Arnaldur Indriðason’s father, Indriði G. Þorsteinsson, wrote some of the best known postwar fiction about the “situation” during his long and successful career as an author. His novel *79 á stöðunni* (1955; “Taxi 79”), for instance, describes the relationship between an innocent man from the countryside, who feels uprooted and lonely in the city, and the world-wise femme fatale Gógó, who has sexual relations with American soldiers from the base to gratify her selfish needs. His novel *Norðan við stríð* (1971; *North of War*, 1981) revolves entirely around the occupation of Iceland and its influence on the local population. Here, Icelandic women are portrayed as being at the mercy of their uncontrollable sexual hunger for soldiers, with one notorious scene of a married woman inviting and enjoying her rape by a soldier, while Icelandic men are forced to stand by, impotent in every respect. These novels are not isolated examples but quite typical of the literary representation of women in relation to the military presence in Iceland, revealing a masculine crisis brought on by the threat of change to traditional patriarchy and the deep-seated fear of liberated women with control over their own bodies and sexuality (Neijmann, 2013). It would seem, therefore, that Indriðason is using the crime genre with which he has made his own name as an author to redress the legacy of the father to present a much more critical view of the occupation and the “situation”.

Hidden people

The detection process in crime fiction is of course all about the revelation of that which is hidden. Indriðason plays with this in a particularly intriguing fashion in *Skuggasund* by using folk belief and folk stories about the hidden people – that is, elves. Icelandic elves have become a sentimentalised tourist trap in recent years, but in this novel, traditional stories about the hidden people become something altogether more sinister. The women who are raped are told afterwards that they should blame the hidden people and say that they have been attacked by a male elf. While the first victim who is never found still believed in the old stories to some extent, it is made quite clear that this belief has been dying out fast with the

advent of modernity and life in the city. Indeed, Rósamunda, the second victim, does not believe in elf stories at all and is completely stunned by this.

Tales about the hidden people tended to express the experiences and problems of women in a way that would soften the pain, as a folktale expert in the novel explains to detectives Flóvent and Thorson. Many tales tell of the beautiful and tender love between an elf man and a human woman, and any illegitimate children, which had to be disposed of, in these stories were given to the male elves who would take care of them. The elves live in a dreamworld which forms a complete contrast to the poverty and misery people suffered in their daily lives, particularly women (Indriðason, 2013, 213). Heta Pyrhönen (1999, 5) has pointed out that, in crime fiction, the murderer authors two stories of the crime: the authentic one and a false one. In *Skuggasund*, the rapist subverts the traditional women's tales of the hidden people – secret companions, helpers and lovers – into a false and cruel narrative intended to cover up a male crime against women, which turns him into a hidden man and at the same time casts doubt on the credibility of the women, should they dare tell anyone of the crime committed against them. Once a vehicle of expression for those who did not have a voice, the stories of hidden people are here twisted to serve the needs of those in power to cover up their dirty secrets. Eventually, it is this strange story of a “hidden man” connected to the crimes that brings the various strands of the narrative together and helps bring to light the true “hidden” story of the crimes – just as the “situation” is used by Hólmbergt as an excuse for committing violent crimes against women to protect his father.

The tradition of elf stories is handled very delicately by Indriðason. With the increased interest in foreign media, Icelandic elves have become a very sensitive topic. In *Skuggasund*, however, there is no pandering at all to foreign fascination with a supposed Icelandic belief in elves. Indeed, most of the characters do not believe in them. The novel succeeds in striking a precarious balance between respect for a time-honoured tradition and its role in Icelandic society on the one hand, and on the other hand a clear indication that the belief in elves is something of the past. Jónatan, the folklore expert in the novel, makes it very clear that his own interest is purely a scholarly one: these stories provide him with a glimpse, directly or indirectly, into the life and worldview of ordinary people in former days, about their fear of the unknown and their dreams of a better world (Indriðason, 2013, 191). In other words, they constitute another connection to the past: a hidden past of poverty, fear and grief turned into stories of solace and wish-fulfilment.

Not everything is uncovered in the end, however. As is the case in *Grafarhögn*, the body of one of the victims is never found. It is assumed the missing women in the two novels have committed suicide, but this is never confirmed. While Sólveig's body in *Grafarhögn* is believed to lie somewhere on the bottom of the ocean, in *Skuggasund*, Hrund's body lies hidden deep in the crack of a lava field. Thus there is no reassurance of closure: for every solved crime against a woman, there remains an unsolved one, it seems.

Investigating the past

In Indriðason's crime fiction, the past is always relevant in the present, but it is never the source of an easy nostalgia. What is uncovered relates to a past that people prefer to forget, or at least not speak about, riddled with shame and pain, poverty and cruelty, survival under the most difficult of circumstances. However, the past demands to be recognised, remembered and told, indicated in these novels by an inability to forget. Most of the characters suffer from

a gnawing conscience, memories that will not leave them alone, ghosts from the past that haunt them. Modernity may often be seen as the source of a culture of forgetting, paving over the landscape of the past, but in Indriðason's novels, it just as often provides the trigger for the recovery of the past. It is urban sprawl that brings the skeleton in *Grafarþögn* to light, and it is Rósamunda's body in the city that is found. And not least, it is modern science and technology and an urban infrastructure on which the detection process relies. With the changes brought by the occupation Iceland acquired that infrastructure, and this period can therefore be seen as marking the inception of modern murder investigation, and, by extension, the source of Icelandic crime fiction. Indriðason pays homage to this in *Skuggasund*, where Flóvent is the first officially appointed Icelandic criminal detective.

The occupation provides Indriðason with a historical background which is not only the source of the genre in which his reputation as an author is based, but also constitutes the point where the past and present converge – where the old Iceland meets the new. Using the conventions of the crime genre and the detection process, Indriðason exposes the crimes committed against women and children in the patriarchal system under cover of a larger war of which it denies all responsibility but is happy to profit from. In doing so, he has successfully created his own Icelandic versions of the kind of literary explorations of the legacy of World War II written elsewhere in Europe, striking a new note in Icelandic literature as he does so. His fictional investigations into a pivotal period in twentieth-century history uncover alternative versions of the past that never made it into the official history books, expose hidden secrets and transgressions used by those in power to protect their interests, and probe national narratives and identity. Thus, they raise questions in the present, while bringing to light the hidden stories and buried memories that form our connection to the past and demand to be heard.

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