

MOONSTONE

THE BOY WHO NEVER WAS



S J Ó N

The year is 1918 and from Reykjavik the erupting volcano Katla can be seen colouring the sky night and day. Life in the small capital carries on as usual despite the natural disaster, shortage of coals and the Great War that still wages in the big world.

The sixteen year old kid Mani Steinn lives for the movies. Asleep he dreams the pictures in variations where the tapestry of events is threaded with strands from his own life. Awake he lives on the outskirts of society. But then the "Spanish influenza" epidemic comes ashore and forces thousands of the townspeople into the sick bed, killing hundreds. The shadows of existence deepen. The black wings in Mani Steinn's breast beat faster. A chilling draught blows between the worlds in a place where life and death, reality and imagination, secrets and revelations jostle for dominance.

Moonstone—The Boy Who Never Was is Sjon's first novel since the acclaimed *From the Mouth of the Whale* in 2008.

SOLD TO:

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SJÓN (born 1962, Reykjavik, Iceland) began his literary career at the tender age of 15 when his first poetry collection, *Sýnir* (*Visions*), was published in 1978. He was one of the founding members of the neo-surrealist group Medúsa and early on acquired a high profile on the Reykjavik cultural scene. He has published numerous poetry collections and eight novels, as well as written plays, librettos and picture books for children. Alongside his work as writer Sjón has taken part in a wide range of art exhibitions and music events.

His long-time collaboration with the Icelandic singer Björk led to an Oscar nomination for his lyrics for the Lars von Trier movie *Dancer in the Dark*.

In 2005 Sjón won the prestigious Nordic Council's Literary Prize for his fifth novel *Skugga-Baldur* (*The Blue Fox* in English / *Schattenfuchs* in German) which has been sold to publishers in well over 20 countries. In 2009 the English edition of *Skugga-Baldur* was nominated for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize.

Sjón's novel *Rökkurbýsnir* (*From the Mouth of the Whale* in English / *Gleißer der Nacht* in German) from 2008 was published to much acclaim in German by S. Fischer, in Spanish by Nordica Libros, in English by Telegram Books, among others. It was nominated for the Icelandic Literary Prize, shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize 2012 and for The International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award 2013.

Sjón's poems have been translated into more than twenty languages and have appeared in anthologies and magazines as well as in separate editions in French, *figures obscures* (Cahiers de Nuit), German, *Gesang des Steinesammlers* (Kleinheinrich), and Macedonian, *Anatomija na gladniot* (SPV).

His latest collection of poems *söngur steinasafnarans* (*the song of the stone collector*) was nominated for the Icelandic Literary Prize in 2007.

Sjón has written a libretto for the opera, *The Motion Demon*, premiered by the Danish independent music theatre ensemble Figura in March 2011, as well as worked on the play *Tales from a Sea Journey* devised in collaboration with the international theater company NIE (New International Encounter), premiered in Oslo in the autumn of 2010.

During the academic year 2007/08 Sjón held the Samuel Fischer Guest Professorship at the Freie Universität in Berlin. He has been a guest of the DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogramme in the year 2010/11. Sjón is the president of the Icelandic PEN Centre and the chairman of the board of Reykjavik, UNESCO city of Literature. His novels have been translated into twenty-five languages.

„...working with opposites and extremes ...“

In the book a variety of threads are traced, disparate threads that nevertheless knit really well together in this unique story. What inspired this work?

For many years I had been collecting material about the three elements that form the backdrop to the story of Máni Steinn – the Spanish Influenza epidemic which reached Iceland in the autumn of 1918, Icelanders' interest in films right from the birth of cinematography, and the history of homosexual people in the microcosm that is Reykjavík – but I could never see a way to make use of it, neither in combination nor individually. Not until I had the idea of placing a young boy in the middle of the Spanish Influenza epidemic, a boy who, because of his situation, watches events from the outside, and is not emotionally traumatised like other townspeople whose close relatives and friends were dying. I then realised that of course he was crazy about the cinema, which made it possible for me to interweave that with his real life. But the reason for his being an outsider in society was missing for a long time, which meant that I couldn't make much progress apart from working on the usual research I always do when I'm writing. And then I read the novel *A Life Apart* by Neel Mukherjee, and I realised that Máni Steinn was gay, like the central character in that book. When that bit of the jigsaw fell into place, the story appeared before me remarkably clearly, and it took me much less time to write than I had thought it would.

Factual material provides to some extent the basis for all your books. Did you have to do a lot of research when you wrote this book?

Yes, I ploughed through all that's been written about the Spanish Influenza epidemic and the history of gay

people in Iceland; in both instances remarkably little has been written to date. I read whole volumes of contemporary newspapers in order to get the "vision" of those who were alive at that time, in the same sort of way I did with both *Skugga-Baldur* (*The Blue Fox*) and *Rökkurbýsnir* (*From the Mouth of the Whale*). I also researched cinema culture in Reykjavík up to 1919; hardly anything had been written about that, and it surprised me how many good films were shown during those early years of the full-length feature film. For instance, during the very cold year of 1918 ninety films were imported, so that every three days a new film was premiered in one of the two cinemas in the town, whose inhabitants at that time numbered fifteen thousand. Finding the original titles of these movies took a lot of effort, because most of them came to Iceland via Denmark, where they had been given Danish names. And I watched as many of them as I possibly could. Since then I have become an even greater fan of silent films, which were certainly not just silent and black-and-white, because they were always accompanied by music and were often in colour. The recent rekindling of interest in this unique art form, which has more in common with poetry and dance than other narrative forms, is a great source of joy to me.

The scenery of the age in the book is vast and dramatic – the Katla volcano spits out fire and brimstone, the Spanish Influenza epidemic kills thousands of people, the Great War rages in the world outside, and the Icelandic nation prepares to become an independent state. These are portentous times, it is in fact a world that has fallen apart, and yet it has much relevance for us today – a classic theme.

I really enjoy working with opposites and extremes. Most of my novels feature confrontations between



ROBERT HERRING, KENNETH MAC PHERSON AND BRYHER, IN ICELAND 1929.

contrasting ideologies, along with an examination of the lot of individuals caught up in such periods of unrest. In *Mánasteinn* (*Moonstone – the Boy Who Never Was*) the cultural world of the “Saga nation” meets the narrative form of the movies, and there is at least one person who hears the call of the age in this brand new art form. But Iceland’s history is mostly the story of an island that lies to the north of wars, and the moments when its history converges with that of the big world beyond its shores are so rare that a novelist can’t let an opportunity like that pass by.

To what extent is *Máni Steinn’s* story a true story?

Of all the characters I have created, *Máni Steinn* is in many ways the closest to me. His character and his interests have much in common with the adolescent I once was – the rebellion, the movie mania, being at odds with society – and this is epitomized in his interest in Louis Feuillades’ exciting serial film *Les Vampires* about a criminal gang known as “The Vampires”. Feuillades’ films were extolled by the surrealists, and here *Máni* and I come together, discovering for instance René Magritte and Robert Desnos, who exploited his work in their pictures and poems. The book actually begins with a fantastic poem by Desnos, *Under Cover of Night*, which became a great inspiration for me when I was trying to find the right tone for the narrative. Apart from the fact that *Máni’s* fate is tougher than anything I’ve ever had to experience, we also differ in that he is gay and I’m not. Another “true” event in the story occurs in the final chapter,

where three significant figures appear in supporting roles, the poets Robert Herring and Bryher, and the cinematographer and editor Kenneth MacPherson, who travelled together to Iceland in 1929 in order to make a film. These three turning up in our little capital in the North were representatives of world culture both in art and in life, as Bryher was married to MacPherson and at the same time they were both having affairs with the American poetess H.D. It was a great moment when I came across records of that visit, because it epitomises all the novel’s main subject matters.

You have been quoted as saying that in all your novels you are mainly dealing with the same main theme: *Being a decent human being is very difficult. Does the same apply to this particular book?*

Absolutely. Fate and his fellow men have pushed *Máni Steinn* to the fringes of society, and he feels he will always be a spectator, looking at other people’s lives. But when Reykjavík’s darkest hour strikes the city and its townspeople, he feels compassion for them and emerges as a more complete human being than before. Whether his reward turns out to be anything more than an increased understanding of himself is not at all certain. But so long as there is something exciting on in the cinema, and adventures of the night beckon, our protagonist is at peace with his life. And so should we be, too.

INTERVIEW: FORLAGID PUBLISHING

Recent reviews on *The Whispering Muse* and *From the Mouth of the Whale*

"Funny, strange, provoking and disturbing;
darkness with a light touch."

TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

"*The Whispering Muse* is a quirky, melodic,
ticklish, seamlessly-translated, lovingly-polished
gem of a novel. Sjón's work deserves space on any
self-respecting bookshelf of European fiction."

DAVID MITCHELL

"Long-term fans of Sjón will recognise this
trademark interweaving of myth and postmodern
playfulness ... *The Whispering Muse* is essential
reading."

GUARDIAN

"Sublime, a work of coy humour and shape-
shifting magic."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"Sjón writes like a man under a spell, filled with
enchantment and magic and great wit. He is a
rogue of the first order."

WASHINGTON POST

"*The Whispering Muse* is a wonderful story about
stories, evoking comparisons to Borges, Nabakov
and Calvino while remaining a complete original.
Sly, dry and elegant, with a diamond brilliance."

CHRIS WILSON

"An extraordinary, powerful fable - a marvel."

ALBERTO MANGUEL

"An extraordinary and original writer"

A.S. BYATT

"Once again, Sjón has chosen an unusual subject,
interwoven the fantastical with the ordinary, and
produced a complex and strangely compelling
work of fiction."

HUFFINGTON POST

"When a poet such as Sjón writes a novel, the
reader may expect the elliptical in both senses
of the word - economy and ambiguousness ...
Seamlessly translated by Victoria Cribb."

WORLD LITERATURE TODAY

"*The Whispering Muse*, a marine fable of rare
beauty and originality, is sure to inspire the urge
to return to Sjón's writing for the verve, humor, and
verbal artistry one is sure to find in it."

QUARTERLY CONVERSATION

"*The Whispering Muse* defies easy summary.
Instead, it is one of those immersive, experiential
works of art: exhilarating, then bewildering when
one looks up from the page and tries to refocus on
'so-called real life.' Through Sjón's skewed lens, a
mythical yet modern world emerges."

GLOBE AND MAIL

"Hallucinatory, lyrical, by turns comic and tragic,
this extraordinary novel should make Sjón an
international name. His evocation of seventeenth
century Iceland through the eyes of a man born
before his time has stuck in my mind like nothing
else I've read in the last year."

HARI KUNZRU

“Sjón writes like a madman. His novel is by turns wildly comic and incandescent, elegant and brittle with the harsh loneliness of a world turned to winter.”

THE WASHINGTON POST

“This is an extraordinarily accomplished novel that challenges and informs the reader in equal measure.”

THE INDEPENDENT

“Kaleidoscopic and mesmerising, comic and poignant by turns. *From the Mouth of the Whale* should open up a world of nature and of ideas, which stands comparison with the Iceland of the Nobel Prize laureate Halldór Laxness.”

TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

“Sjón is one of the most original and serious authors of Iceland.”

DER TAGESSPIEGEL

“With his untamed thoughts Sjón’s exiled protagonist takes us to the fragile boundary that separates man from universe.”

FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG

“A distant cosmos, as if it had been rediscovered and resurrected by the Romantics.”

SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG

“*From the Mouth of the Whale* has the character of a daring Icelandic saga, it is a wild native novel full of ghosts and malice, full of thirst for knowledge.”

NEUE ZÜRCHER ZEITUNG

“A cabinet of curiosities.”

TAZ

“An enlightenment, in the best sense of the word, the novel’s unique hero confirms that Sjón has become one of the unavoidable names of contemporary European literature.”

EL PAÍS

“*From the Mouth of the Whale* offers the reader a world to live in.”

EL MUNDO

“With this beautiful novel it is clear that Sjón tries for and succeeds in the role of a modern day national poet.”

DAGENS NYHETER, NORWAY

“This is a test of strength, a playful display of an authors ability to take historical material and swing it over his head, use it in any way that pleases him.”

SVENSKA DAGBLADET, SWEDEN

“In his novel *From the Mouth of the Whale* Sjón fabulates his way towards a reality that is much more real than reality.”

WEEKENDAVISEN, DENMARK

“Sjón means ‘vision’, and a visionary he is in this composition of science, wisdom and tamed wildness, balancing between the precise historical documentation and the dry facts expected from a historical novel, and crisp poetry where reverence for nature is allowed to glow.”

INFORMATION, DENMARK

„A MAGUS OF THE NORTH

Every now and then a writer changes the whole map of literature inside my head. The most recent has been the Icelander Sjón, whose work is unlike anything I had read, and very exciting.

... I think of Icelanders as erudite, singular, tough, and uncompromising. Sjón is all these things, but he is also quicksilver, playful, and surreal.

... I associate Sjón with a group of writers—mostly southern Europeans—who also tell and retell old tales. Roberto Calasso, Italo Calvino, and Claudio Magris reshape history and the history of thought with interwoven tales. ...

... Iceland is a land of fierce contrasts, fire and ice. It is a land where real people believe in a matter-of-fact way that our visible world is interwoven with magic—a country in which the places are known where elves live and work. I have seen marked boulders where the doors to the other world are known to be. Sjón's great variety of figures, simultaneously very solid and shape-changing and vanishing, are Icelandic, and beyond that European. He has changed the way I see things."

A.S. BYATT
THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS



FORLAGIÐ

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