



Blocking period: 11 October 2011, 6.00 p.m.

The spoken word applies

An address by Guðrún Eva Mínervudóttir to mark the opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair 2011

Ladies and gentlemen

I am grateful for the honour of addressing you here today. On behalf of my good colleagues in the writing profession, as well as all those working in the Icelandic publishing world, I would also like to express gratitude for Iceland's opportunity to bask in the spotlight of the largest and most respected book fair in the world.

We have a twofold reputation: On one hand, as a country of literature and culture. On the other, as a primitive society populated by farmers and hunters, who have no understanding of economics and believe banks to be magical factories that make money out of thin air. The term "noble savage" springs to mind, and I don't think it will offend anyone, because we have always been proud of our apartness and played along with the image rather than the opposite.

According to stereotype, Icelanders are children of nature who believe in elves and ghosts, but the fact is that our pact with nature is not always taken seriously. Only now is there a general realization that nature is not an enemy to be constantly harried, but rather that it is our responsibility to cherish our land and protect it.

We possess, and make use of, the luxury of being able to get out into nature with little effort. This makes up for many of the disadvantages of life in a small country: the homogeneity, the minority complex, and the provincialism that complicates our relationships with one another and the rest of the world.

One of the consequences of this provincialism is the infamous bank collapse, and along with the banks, our self-image also partly collapsed. While it is in need of being rebuilt, we must not be tempted to lean on the crutch of nationalism, which is a ridiculous and outmoded phenomenon whichever way one looks at it. What we need instead is humility and honest introspection. That is precisely where literature comes in. It is a mirror that shows everything – the beautiful as well as the ugly.

Fortunately we are, despite everything, able to call ourselves a country of literature. Literature is taught at all levels of education, and we have a remarkable number of active and talented authors. It is also my understanding that an average Icelander will buy eight books per year, which, by all accounts, is considered rather good.

But the number of active authors in Iceland has a perfectly normal explanation: Although we are few in number, we are a nation and must produce our own art. It is normal that a materially affluent society should choose to not live in mental poverty.

We haven't always been affluent. For the most part, our life has centered on survival. Survival in the face of harsh winters, cold summers and natural catastrophes.



A hundred years ago, it was common for households to own only two books, religious in nature, and read from them alternately in the evenings.

Later on, books became a form of entertainment that was taken for granted. Naturally so, as the country's only television station offered only meager and boring fare.

This has changed rapidly in the past few years, just as society itself has changed. Not for the worse, in my opinion. It has merely changed. Books as entertainment are no longer a matter of course, but a world into which people must be led. They must be encouraged to read, reminded of the pleasure and fulfillment that comes with imbibing a story at one's own speed, aided by one's own imagination.

I don't mean to sound like any kind of a saint when it comes to reading. As is the case with most of my compatriots, the American movies I have seen vastly outnumber the Icelandic books I have read. Sometimes I feel I was partially raised in an American high school, with football and cheerleaders. I have read many beautiful landscape descriptions, but I have seen a hundred times as many murders. I have worked on a farm, and yet I feel that I know more of the life and work of detectives than of the life and work of farmers.

This is fine; movies and TV shows are also fiction. And I don't miss the old times. What we have received in return also has worth. The isolation has been broken and we are more a part of the world than before. This is good. The world is an interesting place.

All literature, not just Icelandic, is affected by the constant necessity of competing with other forms of entertainment, entertainment that can be quickly and easily ingested. The demand is for literature to be entertaining, yet it should also bring us depth, and preferably show us something new. If not a new truth, then at least a new approach.

Books should indeed be entertaining – and good books usually are. They have something that pulls us along, makes us want to read more, know more.

But entertainment is not the only role of literature. I believe in the power and purpose of storytelling, as some people believe in God. I believe that stories can awaken us to new thoughts, show us new perspectives on things, strengthen our empathy and teach us to put ourselves in the shoes of others. They console, encourage, give vent, grant salvation and cleanse our spirit.

Literature has teeth, and it is not always easy on us. It must maintain a healthy relationship with uncomfortable truths of all kinds. Literature's most important role is to move and frighten us, shake off lethargy, carry our thoughts into a higher plane, vitalize our aesthetic sense. It should fill us with righteous anger, a commitment to justice and a love of life.

Some think it is naïve to believe that anything new can be written, anything that has not been said before. But if this were true we could all just pack up and go home. The world of literature is boundless, and our role is to keep on exploring and enlarging it.

And this is precisely why we are gathered here.
Thank you.