



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

The spoken word applies

An address by Arnaldur Indriðason to mark the opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair 2011

Dear guests, authors, publishers and readers,

At the beginning of this magnificent book fair in Frankfurt, where Icelandic literature is in the foreground, we who are from Iceland feel, above all, humble and grateful. Humble upon facing such a large literary event where our stories are placed in spotlight. Grateful for this chance to show what we have to offer the world of literature. The gratitude is accompanied by a hope that you will give a warm welcome to our small country's literature.

To get here, we Icelanders have travelled a long and sometimes laborious road. Not only in the geographic sense that our home is a small island far off in the cold North Atlantic, but much rather in a cultural and historical sense. A literary sense. We are proud of the long journey and remarkable history behind us. It has, at once, molded us as a nation more than any other element, and contributed to world culture – to world literature.

For more than eleven centuries, Icelanders have had to contend with the various difficulties that come with inhabiting a rocky and inhospitable island in the Subarctic. Inhabiting the country has never been easy, although we have, for the past century, been able to enjoy its resources to a greater degree than before. The nature is unforgiving, the weather some of the worst in Europe. Geologically, the island is still in flux, its birth far from complete, as evinced by frequent earthquakes and the recent eruptions in Eyjafjallajökull and Grímsvötn. In short: Iceland is a suitable place for poets and authors.

For perhaps it can be said that the creative forces of the land itself have had a part in encouraging and guiding the creative forces of its people, and so it should be no wonder that literature has accompanied us since the very beginning. It began at the settlement of the country, because we were newcomers in a land where nothing had a name. We immediately began composing toponyms: names for our mountains and rivers and waterfalls and glaciers, names such as *Glóðafeykir* (Ember Whirler) and *Gullfoss* (Golden Falls). Then we began writing our history, not least because we remembered it; we knew its beginnings, which set us apart from many other countries. Ever since, this compulsion has stayed with us: this constant urge to chronicle our history, an urge driven both by some form of devotion felt by a small country towards its forefathers and foremothers, and a fear of forgetting. Our former president Kristján Eldjárn spoke truly when he remarked that nowhere in the world was the written word revered to a greater degree than in Iceland.



Works, written in Icelandic and in many ways unique, were born. These have not merely stood the test of time; they are also alive and active within us. A thread, unbroken to this day, runs through the centuries, linking them to us. In the written words of past centuries, we have encountered ourselves. That is why here today, we celebrate the names of those who have given us so much, names such as Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Þórðarson, both of them chroniclers of history; the poets Hallgrímur Pétursson and Jónas Hallgrímsson; and Halldór Laxness, who in his way connected us to them all.

All countries, large and small, offer something unique to the global village. Our contribution is the Icelandic language, and the literature that is its vanguard. We cannot invite you into shimmering palaces or the tallest skyscrapers in the world, but we can invite you into our world of books. We can introduce you to the wonders of the Codex Regius, the manuscript preserving the Poetic Edda. Tattered and grimy old thing that it is, it doesn't look like much, but it contains such a wealth of human wisdom that, as the poet Hannes Pétursson remarked, it is not a book, but one of the heads resting on the shoulders of mankind. We can invite you into the world of the Sagas of Icelanders, which have inspired authors such as Tolkien and Borges. We can tell you about Sturlunga Saga, which relates the greatest conflict in the history of our country, and contains more battle scenes than any movie out of the dream factories of Hollywood. These works speak to us at any point in history.

And the story continues. Our country is still being forged in fire. We are still thinking up place names. Our language and literature continue to shape us as a people. Every year, we still grapple with our contemporary issues through new books, which are relevant to the larger world, just like the ancient sagas. They are a good indicator of the diversity of world literature, so important throughout history, and not least today, as the world continues to shrink and our defining characteristics vanish with each new Facebook post. These works still contain insights into us as human beings; they are a necessary anchoring point in an existence that is becoming an ever-escalating chase after frills and vanity. It is especially now, when Icelandic literature travels more widely than ever before, that we find it has a message for the world, inspired by the belief we have inherited: that no event, no occurrence and no individual is so insignificant that its story does not deserve to be told.

They have deep roots in Icelandic history and culture, but know of no other borders, acknowledge no boundaries. They are a constant reminder that even a small island country such as our own, far out in northern waters and historically only one hard year away from being wiped out, can contribute something significant to the history of world art.

Our friends in Germany have played a large part in the international success of Icelandic literature over the years. They have shown interest in it, published it, read it. And now our good friends have invited us to appear as guest of honour at the world's largest celebration of books, so that we may show that our literature testifies to the significance of the small. It is not least now, in the time of the great worthless papers, that it is good to come here, to Frankfurt, and touch real treasures – treasures that matter to us, treasures that have survived and will survive both boom and bust.

For we know especially well that what one prints on paper matters. Along with other countries, Icelanders recently learned that expensive lesson. Perhaps, during that great paper binge, we lost ourselves. But the best way to find our bearings again is through the act of creation, through the arts, through the creativity of the country and its people. Therein lie the real treasures, the lasting treasures we find beyond the castles in the air that avarice built.

We have come a long way to the Frankfurt Book Fair, and we look forward to enjoyable days in the realm of literature.

Thank you.