

Speech
by
First Lady Eliza Reid
at the
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BOOKS BUILD BRIDGES

Your Majesty,
dear guests:

Blindur er bóklaus maður. The Icelandic language contains many unique proverbs, and this is one of my favourites. It means, *blind is the man who has no books*. Ever since Icelanders have had the tools to record our stories, we have placed a high priority on their value and their significance in communicating with other peoples, in building bridges, as my remarks today are entitled.

A country's literature provides glimpses into its soul, into moments in its time and space that reveal what a nation values, what it fears, what it aspires to be, what makes it tick. Reading books from a different country allows us to learn about a possibly distant place even if we have not had the opportunity to visit ourselves.

Someone who has never travelled to Iceland, for example, can garner a sense of the dispiriting isolation the poor and stubborn farmer Bjartur of Summerhouses felt in his homestead amidst the bleak treeless hills in Iceland's northeast region by reading Nobel Prize winner Halldór Laxness's *Independent People*. One could perhaps relate to the inertia of the directionless Gen X protagonist in Hallgrímur Helgason's *101 Reykjavík*. And one can be instantly transported to various stunning Icelandic locales by reading works by authors such as Steinunn Sigurðardóttir, Sigurður Pálsson, and Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir. (I would like to emphasize, though, that our murder rate is quite the opposite of what one may conclude from devouring all our crime fiction!)

Conversely, here in Sweden, though I confess this is my first visit to Stockholm, I know that August Strindberg described the city colourfully in *The Red Room* and that you can take Stieg Larsson walking tours and follow Lisbeth Salander's proverbial footsteps through the streets of the capital.

In Iceland, we are very proud of our literary heritage and its long tradition. We do not have old buildings to showcase; there was never material or means to construct lasting houses. Instead, the oldest works of art we can share with the world are literary works.

The most well known of these are of course the Icelandic Sagas, the family sagas that have been studied thoroughly by Swedish scholars; incidentally, a group of companies and the Government of Iceland are donating 400 sets of the five-volume edition of new translations of the Sagas to Swedish during this visit. Writer Hallgrímur Helgason has said that the Sagas “are what gives us confidence” as writers. But of course we have more modern literature to showcase, not least the oeuvre of Halldór Laxness, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955. (I used to joke that this means Iceland has won the most Nobel Prizes per capita – until I visited the Faroe Islands last year and learned that they also have a Nobel Prize winner, though not in literature.)

Our Christmas tradition – the annual *jólabókaflóð* – or book flood, is becoming increasingly known on the global stage. During this season, the vast majority of new books are published, and authors hold readings in various locations around the city. The book is still the most popular Christmas present to give.

The main reason literature has been so valuable for Iceland is that it was the foundation of our language, and the language was one of the main reasons why we could found an independent state. And, since we did not have many works of art constructed using lasting materials, it was literature and the works written on vellum that we could show with some pride as tokens of our long cultural heritage. The language united the population, and it was best preserved in the prose sagas.

The Icelandic language is both blessing and challenge: It’s unique, and poetic, and beautiful, and what inspires us, but on the other hand it can be a challenge to find the right people to translate our books into other languages. But just as it is important for Icelanders to read books in Icelandic translation, so it is for other people to read Icelandic books in their own language.

For in fact, somehow, reading foreign literature helps one understand one’s own literature. It helps one discover what is unique about it. And indeed, visiting a country by visiting its literature is still a very efficient way of traveling.

Iceland’s beloved poet, Jónas Hallgrímsson, once wrote:

Eg er kominn upp á það
– allra þakka verðast –

að sitja kyrr í sama stað,
og samt að vera' að ferðast.

(≈ I have finally discovered
something I am grateful for
to sit quietly in the same place
and yet be traveling)

Let us continue to read each other's stories, to learn more about each other through books.

I would like to end by showing you a five-minute video featuring several Icelandic authors talking about how Iceland and its literature inspires them.