

## The News From Iceland

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

*The Thaw: stories*, by Ólafur Gunnarsson.  
New American Press, 2013.



What most Americans know of Icelandic literature can be summed up in one writer: Nobel Laureate Halldór Laxness (*Independent People*). Icelandic crime writers are now being translated because of the recent interest in “Nordic Noir.” Yet most of us remain oblivious to this island nation with a trilingual population (Danish, English as well as Icelandic) and, reputedly, the highest number of bookstores per capita in the world. New American Press makes a welcome breakthrough with its new collection *The Thaw*, from Icelandic Literary Prize winner Ólafur Gunnarsson.

Originally published in Iceland in 2011 under the title *The Masterpiece*, the nine stories new to English were translated by Gunnarsson and Steven Meyers; the 10th, a novella called “Gaga,” first appeared in English in 1988, translated by David McDuff, and was called at the time “a sci-fi Don Quixote.” The remaining stories are set variously from World War II to our own cell-phone age.

Gunnarsson writes clear, unadorned prose, with an emphasis on a given situation that moves relentlessly toward its conclusion. Characterization is so minimized that many of his people remain nameless. The stories range from the domestic to the wacky, from sibling rivalry to attentive or menacing parents, from artists young and old to one “has been” musician caught up in a beauty contest. His characters inhabit a stark world of limited choices and personal failure, where, in one stroke, comedy and tragedy might clasp hands. In the Anglo Saxon world, cheerfulness and hypocrisy often times conceal menace, which hides—to paraphrase Harold Pinter—like “a weasel in a cabinet.” In Gunnarsson’s sometime surreal realm, the weasel is there for all to see; this is not a place where sham decorum thrives.

The bleak humor of "The Man Who Wanted to be Vincent" resides in the unsuccessful artist Viktor's lack of humor, his desire to shake off what others see as Van Gogh's influence. His set-to with a couple hiking the mountain, as he paints *en plein air*, finally releases him from this small curse. In the opening story, "Alien," a man cares for twin daughters after his wife deserts them. He engages in a small but devastating act of malice toward one child as he drops her off at grammar school, for no other reason than the girl resembles the unfaithful wife.

In the title story, "The Thaw," two middle-aged brothers, both handyman, remain in the family home where the envious older sibling, Ragnar, bosses and belittles the tongue-tied younger one, Jonas. Two elements inform this tale of sibling rivalry with a post-WWII twist. The first entails the recent departure of American servicemen and the dismantling of their barracks. Hardware left behind by the Allies must be disposed of, including trucks that are rolled out onto the frozen lake to sink when the thaw sets in. The second element involves a legend told by their father of a rider long ago who rode his horse across the lake on a drunken dare, only to vanish in the middle. As in other stories of lonely men, a woman tips the scales, triggering Jonas' act of retaliation, foreshadowed earlier in the tale.

The most provocative and memorable story, "Killer Whale," follows a divorced father who takes his ill and disabled daughter whale watching. Only Olaf—a furniture dealer—is named. His imperious ex-wife, her brow-beaten new husband, the child and her nurse (who catches Olaf's sexual attention) are unnamed. Olaf appears interested in life but makes a startling parental decision we are not fully prepared for, in spite of Gunnarsson's clues. Complicit in the finale is a whale whose sudden appearance the narrator describes as miraculous. "He could see the white patch next to the eye and then the great fin, even though the moon had not come out."

Like Laxness' protagonist Bjartur—a simple sheep farmer who disregards the needs of wives, children and the family cow in his relentless drive toward independence—Gunnarsson's people exhibit a grim determination. One cannot help but wonder to what extent an exposed landscape shapes his characters' temperaments, where tundra, lakes and glaciers stand in for trees.