

MINDREADING

The Fish Can Sing by Halldór Laxness: holding fast against vanity and illusion

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SUMMARY

In his early novels, the Icelandic Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness portrayed troubled individuals beset by familial, societal and economic challenges within an unpredictable and often unforgiving landscape; his later work addressed humanistic concerns regarding a well-lived life and the harmony of individual and environment. His 1957 novel *The Fish Can Sing* lies at the cusp of these preoccupations. Laxness contrasts the economic privations experienced by hard-pressed Icelanders with the ostentatious displays of their Danish colonial overloads; he also portrays individuals afflicted by psychosis, alcohol use disorders and medically unexplained physical symptoms, and delineates the path towards a ‘celebrity’ suicide. The novel warns against self-deceptive vanity and community-endorsed illusions, and celebrates the persistent benefits of nurturing relationships, all within a lyric contemplation of individual adaptive resilience and quotidian domestic pleasures.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None

In a previous Mindreading, I introduced the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness (1902–1998) and his novel *The Great Weaver from Kashmir* (Baldwin 2016). In this and other early novels, Laxness portrays how individuals vary in response to familial, societal and economic challenges in an inhospitable and tempestuous environment: some adapt and even flourish, whereas others are insufficiently light-footed and fall by the wayside. Laxness depicts the disruptive consequences of parentlessness, childhood abuse and impoverishment, and the widespread sexual commodification of women in an emerging but still patriarchal society. He also illustrates flexible resilience against the effects of prolonged adversity, and provides exemplars of female self-actualisation and emancipation.

At the end of 1955, the year in which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, Laxness

BOX 1 Some early novels by Halldór Laxness

Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír (*The Great Weaver from Kashmir*), 1927

Sjálfstætt fólk (*Independent People*), 1934–35

Ljós heimsins (*World Light*), 1937–40

Íslandsklukkan (*The Bell of Iceland*), 1943–46

Atómstöðin (*The Atom Station*), 1948

started the manuscript for what appeared, 18 months later, as *The Fish Can Sing* (Laxness 1957, translation 2001). In describing its troublesome evolution, he admitted feeling that he was ‘on a kind of wayward path in writing it’ (Guðmundsson 2008): he was at an uncertain and unsettling intersection. The early enigmatic modernism of *The Great Weaver from Kashmir* had passed, and the passionate fervour driving the social realism of *Independent People* and *World Light* and assertive nationalism of *Iceland’s Bell* and *The Atom Station* (Box 1) were giving way to sorrowful disillusion with political constructions.

Integrity or opportunism?

Distancing himself from the class struggle, Laxness embraced Taoist concerns about the harmony of individual and environment, and adopted more contemplative formulations (Magnússon 1992). He had been lauded widely with national celebrations of his literary achievement, and *The Fish Can Sing* comments on the position of the artist within society, the fragility of fame, and the conflict between integrity and opportunism. Its meandering narrative draws on shared memories, myths and values to chart the development of personal and national identity (Leslie 2011). The novel addresses the balance of personal individuation with community affiliation, and the contrasts between self-important prominent bigwigs and self-deprecating ‘Hidden People’: those described by Laxness as ‘ordinary folk, who

foster all peaceful human virtues', 'who accomplish all great deeds, yet do not pride themselves'. Laxness also continues the consideration of how individuals respond to adversity and setback, through delineating the pathway to a 'celebrity' suicide; and portrays how destitute seekers of asylum, and individuals seemingly afflicted by psychosis, intermittent alcoholism and medically unexplained physical symptoms, are nurtured within a receptive, safe and supportive haven.

The action is narrated in retrospect by Álfgrímur, who was raised by adoptive 'grandparents' in a stone-and-turf cottage (named Brekkukot) at the margin of Tjörninn, the small lake in Reykjavík. His fugitive, desolate and abandoned single mother gave birth there, while waiting for a ship to America: as his father was unknown, Álfgrímur has the surname 'Hansson' (literally 'his son' – 'like all fatherless children in Iceland'). He recalls accepting his status as orphan without bitterness or a sense of misfortune, and treasures memories of the haven of Brekkukot: 'a free and ever-open guesthouse for anyone and everyone who had need of shelter', a welcoming home for 'people who would nowadays be called refugees'. He grows up feeling nurtured by the constant, silent and omniscient grandfather, and many years later still senses his supportive and encouraging presence: an appreciation of the tragic losses but stoic endurance of his frail and bowed grandmother only comes later in life.

Kinship and tolerance

Brekkukot accommodates and encourages its new residents and the community thrives without the oversight of 'the authorities'. Álfgrímur shares the Brekkukot 'mid-loft' with a motley group of ageing men comprising a grandiose saga-telling and nearly blind harbour pilot decorated by the Danish King; a barely seen but philosophical and whimsical 'Superintendent' at the port, reputedly connected to elves; and a seemingly self-appointed 'official' manure-spreader with circumlocutory 'weird' speech, whose intermittent drunkenness and disorderly conduct lead to only temporary exclusion. Within Brekkukot, overt displays of emotion are infrequent and passing fads are ignored, but scholarship is valued. The close relationships between its unrelated persons seem imbued with *félag*, the Icelandic word connoting fellowship or partnership: they are enduring kinship compacts based on common residence and shared experience (Pinson 1979). And so Álfgrímur grows up in an independent and resilient therapeutic community with the principles of mutuality, tolerance and respect.

Brekkukot lies next to a churchyard and Álfgrímur recalls the many funerals and his heartfelt sympathy for the plight of the unmourned dead: at one such funeral, he was invited to join the committal and sang 'Just As The One True Flower' over the grave, so discovering his Voice – 'and thus I began to sing for the whole world'. The listening church Pastor comments enigmatically, 'there is one note and it is pure'. The innate prodigious musical ability of Álfgrímur represents a disruptive threat to his adoptive grandparents and to his 'aunt' Kristín (sister to his 'grandmother') at Hríngjarabær. Kristín's son Georg, also nominated 'Hansson', had a similar talent, which was developed through musical training underwritten by the local business magnate Gúðmúsen. Georg achieves renown as the opera singer known as Garðar Hólm and is portrayed as a travelling cultural ambassador for Iceland, whose resplendent concerts and meetings with world leaders and other iconic figures are unreservedly celebrated in the Icelandic newspapers. But although Kristín and her sister both display a portrait of a youthful Georg in their homes, neither appears comfortable when discussing him, and grandmother regrets the ill fortune through which Georg 'took to travelling'.

Álfgrímur recalls pondering on his feeling of connectedness with Garðar and wondering whether this extended beyond coincidental location: 'Perhaps it was just the same sound that awakened us both [...] I can scarcely remember the time when he was not the distant murmur behind the blue mountain beyond the sea in my own life'. They are steadily drawn together, after Garðar returns to Iceland unexpectedly. They have the same allocated surname, and many think they are related. A triangular friendship develops with the plump teenaged daughter of Gúðmúsen. Garðar states to Álfgrímur, 'There is no need to be so formal with me. It is like being formal with oneself'. At a funeral service Garðar listens while Álfgrímur sings a Schubert Lied, then warns 'one should not sing for one's own enjoyment', stating 'there is the one note – but he who has heard it never sings again', so echoing the comment the Pastor had made to them both, though separated by 25 years. 'Little Miss' Gúðmúsen declares that she would readily become Garðar's mistress 'for ever and ever', but later announces to Garðar that she and Álfgrímur are 'engaged' after a night of fumbled sexual intimacy. Garðar is shown to be disenchanted, world-weary, destitute and possibly fugitive; he fails to materialise at much anticipated public appearances, and steadily declines without support such as that provided at Brekkukot. By

contrast, Álfrímur has to substitute for Garðar after the celebrity's final non-appearance: this performance of Álfrímur is acclaimed, but Garðar commits suicide that evening.

Authenticity and independence

At this point Álfrímur has completed secondary school education and has emerged from the cocoon of adolescence, but is uncertain about his future career. He has acquired a local reputation for having spiritual healing powers after he had beneficially laid hands on the responsive breast of a neurasthenic woman whose persistent ailments had previously eluded the ministrations of a succession of doctors, a vet, a herbalist and other healers. Knowing that Garðar is dead and seeing another business opportunity, Gúðmúnsen offers to sponsor Álfrímur's further musical training, but Álfrímur resists this seduction, knowing that the merchant had connived with local newspaper editors over many years to manipulate Garðar's image merely for their own benefit, to such an extent that Garðar himself had no longer known who he was. Álfrímur, having resisted all temptations, reconciles himself to putting aside his musical vocation to undertake further study 'for the church', knowing this would please his adoptive grandparents. However, grandmother and grandfather appreciate his integrity and preparedness to suppress individual desire for community benefit – values that they inculcated and helped flourish – and had already decided to support his musical training from the proceedings of the sale of their home. The novel concludes as Álfrímur stands on deck of a ship to Denmark, watching his grandparents turn away from the harbour side and towards the gate at Brekkukot, due to be razed the next day, 'walking hand in hand, like children'.

During his failed attempt to beguile Álfrímur, the merchant Gúðmúnsen recites 'the fish can sing just like a bird', insinuating that acclaim and fortune will follow if Álfrímur takes the subsidised and wayward path previously trodden by Garðar Hólm. But Álfrímur has come to appreciate that celebrity is based on vanity and illusion, whereas authenticity arises from rootedness and integrity. He has discovered and is cherishing his pure and true Voice, and so stands prepared for independence: as the Icelandic nation has to reject subversive colonial impositions to discover its unique culture and take its rightful place on the world stage.

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