

LAXNESS'S WIVES TELL THEIR STORIES

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No twentieth-century Icelandic author has enjoyed success and popularity to rival that of Halldór Laxness. At the end of his writing career, Laxness wrote four books which he called "novels in essay form" or *essais-romans*, but which are generally considered to be memoirs, written with artistic licence. These books are: *Í túninu heima* (In the Field at Home) (1975), *Óngur eg var* (Young was I) (1976), *Sjömeistarasagan* (The Story of Seven Masters) (1978), and *Grikklandsárið* (The Year of Greece) (1980). They cover only a fraction of the author's life, up to the age of twenty. Readers have learned of his subsequent experiences mostly through countless articles and interviews in the press, on radio and television. Laxness has, at least since winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955, been a public personality, although he has been reticent about his private life.

Publishers realised, however, that people were interested in finding out more. *Á Gljúfrasteini* (At Gljúfrasteinn house), a book-length interview by Edda Andrésdóttir with Laxness's second wife, Auður Sveinsdóttir, may be viewed in this light. Published in 1984, it was a smash hit. One of the three best-selling books of the year, it was reprinted twice and sold about 9,000 copies. The fourth print run was made the following year. After Auður's book came the story of Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir, Laxness's first wife, *Í aðalhlutverki Inga Laxness* (Inga Laxness in the Leading Role), written by Silja Aðalsteinsdóttir. The book was published

in 1987 and it sold well, but not nearly so well as Auður's book (about 3,000 copies). There was no lack of interest, though, in Halldór Laxness, as his 85th birthday was celebrated a variety of ways that year. Perhaps readers were less interested in Laxness's former wife than the present one, especially since she was no longer in the public eye. Or they may have been disappointed with the earlier book. However, both books were given for the most friendly reviews on publication.

These two books of memoirs will be discussed here. Memoirs of women who have come forward to bear witness about their famous husbands have been called "spouses' stories" (Helgi Skúli Kjartansson 82). It may be postulated a priori that *Á Gljúfrasteini* and *Í aðalhlutverki Inga Laxness* belong in this category. Certainly, they might never have been written, but for the fact that the women in question married Halldór Laxness. However, it would be unfair to the ladies not to consider why they decided to tell their stories, and how they did so.

When someone tells the story of his/her life in a book, generally with the purpose of finding out, and demonstrating, who he/she really is, this is normally described as autobiography. Memoirs, on the other hand, focus on people other than the narrator himself, although they are based upon his memories of events and contemporaries (see Hannes Pétursson 28, 91; Jakob Benediktsson 70, 239; Lejeune 3-5; Mandel 52-58).

In Icelandic publishing, the custom is well-established of recording the name of the "ghost writer" of autobiographies and memoirs, if they are not written by the person in question. The "ghost" is recorded as the author of the book in catalogues. By this means, the "ghost's" part in the work is acknowledged, along with his share of the responsibility (Helgi Skúli Kjartansson 80-81). The copyright is divided between the story-teller and the "ghost". The importance of the role of the "ghost" is, however, called in question when libraries shelve these books by the name of the story-teller.

The French literary scholar Philippe Lejeune believes that memoirs written by someone other than the narrator cast a light on the nature of autobiography. In autobiography, the author, the narrator and the hero are combined. People's interest in autobiography springs from the conviction that the text of the book reflects the life, opinions and style of the writer. Although the reader may doubt some individual aspects of the account, autobiographies are not generally viewed as pure invention. In the case of wrong information, the reader generally dismisses this as a failure of memory. But, when memoirs are written by another person, the difference between the writer and the story-teller/hero is revealed. In books of memoirs or interviews, the hero of the story responds to questions. The writer asks, listens, makes notes, and must then undertake

the responsibility of putting the account down on paper. In this way, the narrator becomes a source of information on his own life. Admittedly, his memory is the main source, but not the only one. Writers of memoirs generally seek additional information elsewhere: in diaries, letters, papers and books. But they must aim to capture the style of the narrator, to express the individual personality through the text. However, they will inevitably leave their own imprint on the text, e.g. by adapting the story to literary conventions and to the presumed preferences of the reader. The book-length interview is the latest development in this branch of literature; the role of the "ghost" becomes more visible than hitherto. No doubt this development may be attributed to the influence of radio and television, and it has been well received by readers. (Lejeune 187-91).

Memoirs written down by the third person are a literary form, just like autobiography. And it must not be forgotten that the picture portrayed in this kind of books is not only that of the narrator, but also of the writer, and builds upon the literary and social background of both. Although the autobiographical form allows author and reader to believe that they are recounting who they are, it is probably more correct to say that the narrative creates the personality. The book-length interview reveals the artificiality of this image clearly.

The view has been maintained that autobiographies are predominantly accounts of the lives of those who have been regarded as worth reading about, who set an example in public life. Scholars have also focused upon the individualism in this literature, the search for and examination of self (Gusdorf 30-31, 36-38, Lejeune 3-5, 198). Women have not been prominent, by either definition. Until the past few years, their role in public life has been less than that of men. Also, they are believed to create their self-image differently from men. While men search for their own individual characteristics, women find themselves in their relationships with others: parents, husbands, children. Thus the theory has become established that women's autobiographies are essentially different from men's (Friedman 40-41).

These ideas have been criticised, however, and it has been pointed out that this difference reflects simply the small bit of territory which has been allocated to women, in society and in literature. Society assigns women to the home, and thus they mainly appear as daughters, spouses and mothers. Domestic memoirs have become the lot of women, and these have not generally been regarded as interesting except as spouses' stories (Peterson 90-91). Due to external factors, women do not speak with their own voice. But in this case, their stories are hardly autobiography. If they are to be autobiography, the female narrator must throw off the bonds of tradition (Smith 44, 50).

The tradition created by social custom and the literary institution is a strong one. This is illustrated by what happens when a woman who has lived with and from books, like Auður Laxness, agrees to have a book written about her. She appears as little more than a cliché, the woman behind the great man, although it is suggested at the beginning of the book that her life has been different from other women's lives (see Helga Kress 318). Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir's book, in contrast, breaks with tradition to some extent; the story-teller demands much more attention than Auður, and has no interest in appearing as a replica of Halldór Laxness.

An interesting aspect of the books is that the writers are both far younger women than the narrators, modern women, so to speak, who have earned a name by their own work, in one case in journalism, in the other by various writing. One might, therefore, assume that they would wish to make the most of the role of the wives of the Nobel-prizewinner.

The text on the cover of *Á Gljúfrasteini* states that Edda Andrésdóttir interviews Auður Sveinsdóttir Laxness: on the back of the book cover is a photo of them talking, in the living room at Gljúfra-steinn, Laxness's house. The book is thus intended to be "cosy", and also to be reminiscent of a press interview. The cover text also states that the book is not exclusively based upon interviews with Auður, but, in addition, diaries and other source material from the Laxness couple. The cover also states that "domestic life, upbringing of children, relations with friends and acquaintances and Halldór's work on countless pieces of literature" are intimately linked with Gljúfrasteinn. The slant of the book is clearly illustrated by the fact that hardly a sentence is written without Halldór's name being mentioned. He is also in the background of the cover photograph of the book: Auður sits at the typewriter as Laxness dictates to her.

The difference between *Í aðalhlutverki Inga Laxness* and Auður's book appears immediately on the cover. The cover text states that Silja Aðalsteinsdóttir records Inga's account, and other sources are also mentioned. Halldór Laxness is mentioned, naturally, but he plays a smaller role than that of Inga, who is in the spotlight. But he appears in one small photograph, and in another with Inga. On the front cover, she reigns alone. Only on the inside flap of the book is there a small picture of writer and storyteller, who appear as close friends.

The difference between the covers of Auður's and Inga's books is an indication of their different subject, exposition, structure and style. This difference is clear in the very first pages. *Á Gljúfrasteini* begins thus:

Gradually Gljúfrasteinn house emerges from the mist that hides the Mosfell valley, thick and grey. As the white house and its outlines grow clearer, I think: a woman who has travelled all over the world, met heads of state, influential and famous people of all kinds. Isn't she likely to have a high opinion of herself?

I turn off the ingvellir road, along by a drystone wall to the house. I feel I have an answer to my queries as soon as Auður comes to the door and invites me in [7].

Right from the start, the writer/journalist speaks in the first person, and sets the stage for their interview at Gljúfrasteinn, where the door is opened by Auður, to the journalist and the reader alike. The declared aim of the book is to reveal the domestic scene at Gljúfrasteinn, and the lady of the house, introduced by the writer by her Christian name alone, as if to underline the reader's familiarity with her. Subsequently, the writer occasionally intervenes to describe Auður and her surroundings at Gljúfrasteinn, and to pose questions to her. The writer thus constantly reminds the reader of herself and of the "interview" form of the book.

Auður's story may be divided in three. In the first part, she describes her life until she married Laxness at the age of 27, and moved to Gljúfrasteinn. This section lasts to page 44. The section also includes, however, "flash-forwards", for instance to Laxness's international fame. Part two of Auður's memoirs begins in 1945, and covers the next ten years, until Laxness won the Nobel Prize (pages 45 to 120). The third and longest section lasts from here to the end of the book, page 278, and describes the events of seventeen years or so. The section begins with a description of a world tour undertaken by Halldór and Auður Laxness following the Nobel award. This account lasts until page 181. After this, much of the book consists of accounts of domestic life and other activities connected with Laxness's worldwide fame, and of trips to various countries. The interview runs out of steam around 1972. This final section has the feel of a travelogue, with lists of places the couple visited and people they have met, but with little in the way of descriptive detail.

The fact that the story-teller devotes little space to her early years, before she met Laxness in her early twenties, seems to reflect the writer's interest. Yet this is the part of autobiographical writings to which most space is normally given. Laxness's own memoirs deal mostly with this period of his life. And the years of growing up are generally regarded as the period which contributes most to shaping character. But the writer has other things in mind. In the very first chapter of the book she mentions the Nobel prize award ceremony in Stockholm in 1955, which she has made the climax of the book, and speaks flatteringly of the Nobel laureate.

The writer's (and probably the publisher's) desire to record all sorts of trifles about the Nobel-prizewinner, as well as about his second wife,

makes the real aim of the book rather unclear. It is as if no definite decision was made on who was to be the main character of the book, or whether home life at Gljúfrasteinn, or world travel, was to be the focus. The reader, at least, must regard this as the writer's responsibility, because the writer asks, writes, and makes it quite clear how excited she is about her task, i.e. to interview Laxness's wife, not Auður Sveinsdóttir. The reader, in fact, learns little of Auður Sveinsdóttir, in spite of the 272 pages of narrative. The furnishings at Gljúfrasteinn, dinner parties there and elsewhere, Auður's clothes, especially at the Nobel ceremony, are perhaps a sign that this book is a conversation between two women, written for women. But this does not make Auður's personality any clearer. The book, then, does not reveal the true self of the story-teller. This may probably be attributed to a shallow journalistic approach, and the writer's inexperience. The interviewer does not seem to ask her questions in order to get to know the story-teller and her work. She simply turns the conversation constantly to the subject of Laxness. The admiration of both writer and story-teller for Laxness is, however, so overwhelming that the description of the Nobel laureate is no more than a shadow of a man.

It is thus duty to Halldór Laxness and his literature that is the focal point of Auður's narrative. For him, the young woman from Reykjavík moves to the country, for him she gradually becomes a homemaker, for him she spend the winters alone with their daughters at Gljúfrasteinn in the winter's storms, for him she takes responsibility for all things domestic, for him she receives innumerable guests, invited and uninvited, and for him she rushes around the world. She also gradually becomes his secretary, although this is only mentioned in the book. Auður herself minimises this aspect, although it is emphasised by the book's cover.

Auður seems to be perfectly aware that the book is written because of Halldór, and she accepts this. Her modest claims for herself, and her reticence in discussing her interests, seem to indicate that she realised that, in the end, she would be judged as the novelist's wife, good or bad, as the mother of his daughters, at best as his secretary, but never for herself.

As mentioned above, Inga Laxness's book was published some years after Auður's memoirs. Although there is no clear indication that Auður's book specifically motivated her, it is obvious that she has the previous book in mind, and compares her marriage to Laxness with his second marriage:

In those days Halldór was not in favour of women being "wives", and we were never active in the domestic sphere. We did not hold parties or receptions, but I liked cooking, and we often had guests. When you have your friends with you, it's a good party. There is no need for reception rooms or crowds [174-75].

By these words, Inga illustrates the difference between her account and that of Auður. Inga does not tell stories of domestic life, guests and banquets with the noble and famous. And she does not emphasise duty, but her freedom to be herself. She describes her marriage to Laxness as tying her down: she is not the "wifely type", she is by nature a career woman.

Although *Í aðalhlutverki Inga Laxness* (Inga Laxness in the Leading Role) is called a book of memoirs on the title page, it is more of an autobiography, as the title implies. It is also clear from the book that the story-teller (and probably the writer too) is perfectly aware of what she is doing. At the start of the book, she refers to the literary form:

"You'll start at my birth, won't you", says Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir, with a hint of mistrust in her voice.

"Yes", I reply. "You start by telling me about your parents, and your childhood home".

"Yes, yes, and when I got the acting bug, how I started to act, and what happened next!"

"Precisely. But start at the beginning. Tell me about your birth."

"I don't actually remember it except that I am supposed to have cried a lot. I can well believe it."

"What year were you born?" I ask.

"None of your business. I don't remember, it's so long ago"

"All right. But where were you born?"

"Here in Reykjavík. Probably at Kirkjutorg in the house of Árni Nikk the barber. My parents lived there for a while. Actually, they also lived on Frakkastíg at one time, and I'm not sure which place I was born. I was born in Reykjavík, and it doesn't matter whether it was in one particular hovel or another" [7].

Ingibjörg knows that the story is to be based mostly upon her memory. But she knows too that it is not infallible. She also feels that certain things are nobody's business, and others are of no importance. The writer, Silja Aðalsteinsdóttir, must accept these limitations, delivered so authoritatively by the story-teller, and she does her best to keep faith with her, and allow her voice to be heard.

The writer sticks to the interview framework at the beginning of the book, and at the end, she presents the story-teller addressing her. The origins of the book in interviews between writer and story-teller, as well as the form which "frames" the book, have led to its being called an "interview book". This is only partly correct. Silja describes the collaboration between Inga and herself as follows: they met several times, going over the past, over and over again. Silja then attempted to place events in chronological order by means of albums and cuttings books, which had been compiled by Inga's mother. This has been done so successfully that the result is a practically seamless narrative. The writer presents this, however, in quotation marks, to remind us of how it originated. The writer also inserts explanatory sections, parts of letters from Laxness to

Inga, and even quotations from his books. She also includes a travel article by Inga, published in the periodical *Stundin*, as well as reviews of Inga's acting.

Right from the beginning of the book, Inga (and the writer) make the point that the book is about her acting career. The title also indicates this, but it is true only to a certain degree. The book may be divided into four parts. The first 74 pages recount Inga's youth until the age of sixteen. The years with Laxness, another sixteen, last until page 181. Pages 183 to 233 deal with twenty years in the theatre, and the section from page 235 to the end of the book, page 251, covers her second marriage, more than twenty years. Thus it is clear that the relationship with Laxness occupies a large part of the book. The acting career is not given the same attention, even though Inga feels that her acting triumph in the role of Mrs. Manningham in Patrick Hamilton's *Gas Light* was the high point of her life. Her second husband, Óskar Gíslason, occupies little space, although he was nationally known for his films, and although she speaks warmly of him. This may no doubt be explained by the interest of both writer and publisher; Inga must also be aware in her heart of hearts that an account of her relationship with Laxness will appeal to readers. Sales of Auður's book had already demonstrated that readers were interested in his private life.

Furthermore, Inga wishes to stake a claim to Laxness and his success as a writer. On the other hand, she does not try to conceal the fact that their years of marriage were stormy, and attributes this to her upbringing:

Our parents brought me and my sisters up as modern women, and their own relationship was a shining example of mutual respect between man and wife. Perhaps that had something to do with the fact that my sisters and I were all divorced from our first husbands. Perhaps they were not ready to live with such demanding, liberal women. I don't know. The first marriages were hot and stormy. The second marriages were happy [33-34].

According to Inga's account, she grew tired of her marriage with Laxness, became interested in another man, and finally they were divorced. It was at this point that she decided to become an actress. She says that she had a slight feeling of inferiority to Laxness, and that she feels this may have influenced her in not going into acting earlier: "I was thirty-two when Halldór and I separated in 1940 – a complete replica of him, naturally. I had to try and make something individual of myself, and I had always wanted to be an actress. It was a demanding job" [183]. She then describes her acting studies, and her dramatic triumphs. She was in and around the theatre for twenty years, and felt that life without acting was not worth living. But it was difficult. Parts did not come along automatically, and she always had to work at other jobs.

Just as Inga feels that she left Laxness, she left the theatre voluntarily. She had had enough of freedom and self-involvement, and decided to marry another artist: "I have had two good and clever husbands, each in his own way, the nation's best writer, and the best photographer" [240]. She says that her second marriage was a happy one; they shared interests, and enjoyed being together. She also maintains that there was equality in the home, as she has always seen men and woman as equals, although she enjoys talking to interesting men more. Her story indicates that it is intended for male as well as female readers. It is as if the aged story-teller is putting on an act for the men, and flirting with them.

While Auður Laxness the story-teller thinks first of duty, it is the longing for freedom which preoccupies Inga: her need to find herself, and to fulfill her potential. Although it is probably to some extent thanks to the writer, with her education and writing experience, that Inga makes far more of an impression than Auður in her book, this is no doubt also the result of her own viewpoint. As she says herself: "Nobody has ever dominated me" [238]. And so the individual character of the story-teller/heroine appears clearly to the reader, her own voice echoes off the page.

Inga Laxness is content with life, and speaks as the author of her story, although she realises that facts undergo change. She speaks, shapes, creates herself in this book with the help of her writer. She also knows that the book is not the whole truth about her, and that others have different views of her, as demonstrated by her theatrical reviews, photographs, such as one taken by her second husband in 1965, the letters of Halldór Laxness, and even his books. This double-sided narrative does not, however, make it seem less reliable. The reader may conclude that the story-teller is playing the leading role of Inga Laxness in a play of her own devising, which is at least as true as any other play.

As stated above, the suggestion has been proposed that the emphasis placed by scholars on the individual character and self-awareness of authors of autobiographies does not take account of women, who find themselves in a different way from men. In Auður's and Inga's books, it is clear that they see themselves as daughters, wives and mothers, and are aware of the preconceptions of public opinion on what a woman should be – especially Inga, who feels that she departed from the predestined path.

But one must not deny the fact that the literary tradition has influenced the memoirs of Halldór Laxness's two wives. Both Auður and her writer have given way so utterly to this tradition, that one may ask whether the description of the lady of the Gljúfrasteinn house, her tolerance, unselfishness, hard work, toughness, and conscientiousness, may

be attributed to the guidelines laid down by tradition. The journalist and her interviewee make use of "spouses' stories" and the feminine image they propagate, in order to make some kind of book out of *Á Gljúfrasteini*. No doubt *Í aðalhlutverki Inga Laxness* also owes its origins to this kind of book. But Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir's relationship with Laxness was far from conventional, at least, according to her story. She is also so confident in telling the story that her tale breaks free of the bonds of tradition, and becomes a full-scale autobiography. A story where Inga Laxness plays the leading role just as splendidly as the critics say she played the role of Mrs Manningham in Hamilton's *Gas Light*, so long ago.

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