

V I N T A G E

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eBooks



INDEPENDENT PEOPLE

AN EPIC

**HALLDOR LAXNESS**

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## Acclaim for Halldór Laxness's

### *Independent People*

“This beautiful and heartbreaking novel has haunted me ever since I was lent a rare copy years ago, and I am delighted that what is clearly a masterpiece by a relatively uncelebrated genius will now be available to a wide audience of book lovers. If there is any justice in the world, the name Laxness will soon become a house hold word, at least in those households where timeless works of the imagination are cherished.”

—Joel Conarroe

“Laxness has a poets imagination and a poets gift for phrase and symbol.... Bjartur is a magnificent and complex symbol of peasant independence.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A strange story, vibrant and alive.... There is a rare beauty in its telling, a beauty as surprising as the authentic strain of poetry that lies in the shoving, battering Iclander.”

—*Atlantic Monthly*

“A saga that somehow contrives to recapture the broad, clear air of older Icelandic tales.”

—*The Observer* (London)

“[Laxness] gives a large picture of life under primitive conditions, [he] writes vividly, using irony with vigorous effect; amid the brutality and squalor there are rich moments of humor and poetry.”

—*The Spectator* (London)

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## **Halldór Laxness**

### ***Independent People***

Halldór Laxness was born near Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1902. His first novel was published when he was seventeen. The undisputed master of contemporary Icelandic fiction and one of the outstanding novelists of the century, he has written more than sixty books, including novels, short stories, essays, poems, plays, and memoirs. In 1955 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 1998.

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## **Also by Halldór Laxness**

*Paradise Reclaimed*

*World Light*

*Under the Glacier*

*Iceland's Bell*

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Halldór Laxness

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*Independent People*

An Epic



TRANSLATED FROM THE ICELANDIC BY

J. A. Thompson

INTRODUCTION BY Brad Leithauser

*Vintage International*

VINTAGE BOOKS

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NEW YORK

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## INTRODUCTION



There are good books and there are great books and there may be a book that is something still more: it is the book of your life. If you're quite lucky, you may chance upon a novel which inspires so close a kinship that questions of evaluation (Is this book better than merely good? Is it some sort of classic?) become a niggling irrelevance. Luck has everything to do with it. Anyone who cares seriously about fiction eventually will get around to *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Madame Bovary* or *Don Quixote*, and if you're somebody whose closest literary attachment is to a book of this staple sort, you will not be graced by the particular haunted feeling of good fortune I'm talking about; you will have, instead, the assurance of knowing that your keenest literary pleasures were preordained. One looks differently on the book of genius that, even in a long bookworm's life, one might never have stumbled upon.

The feeling I'm describing may account for Henry Millers declaring that Knut Hamsun's *Mysteries* is "closer to me than any other book I have read." Or John Fowles's reverence toward Alain Fourniers *he Grand Meaulnes*: "I am, in short, a besotted fan, and still feel closer to Fournier than to any other novelist, living or dead." Or Randall Jarrell's obsession with Christina Steads *The Man Who Loved Children*. Or what Rilke felt about Jacobsen, particularly his *Niels Lyhne* ("Of all my books, I find only a few indispensable ... the Bible, and the books of the great Danish author Jens Peter Jacobsen.")

No doubt Miller and Fowles and Jarrell and Rilke recognized that greater novels were to be found than the objects of their devotion. But what does greatness signify once you have met the book that was made for you? For what we are talking about is a sort of imperishable romance, in which the flaws of a book are as endearing—as treasurable—as the flaws in the face of one's sole beloved. This is the real thing: a head-over-heels incredulity that there exists in the universe so perfect an imperfection.

And the book of my own life? Halldór Laxness's *Independent People*. I remember vividly my initial encounter with it. I finished its last chapters one late afternoon in Rome, seated in an all-but-deserted café. Outside, a storm had abruptly blown in and a chill autumn rain was lashing the streets, and I read as though furtively, hunched over the pages. I did this for two reasons. The light had turned dim. And I didn't want anyone to notice I was steadily weeping.

It always strikes me as a bitter irony that, in urging the book on someone, I often must first identify its Nobel Prize-winning author. But the fact is that Laxness won the Nobel many years ago, in 1955, and that he represents the smallest country ever to produce a Laureate: Iceland, with its population of roughly a quarter of a million. Until this edition, the book had long been out of print in English.

I might never have read *Independent People* had I not, in the summer of 1984, spent two weeks hiking in Iceland. However obscure a figure Laxness may be to Americans, in his native land he is a colossus without peer or parallel, and anyone drawn to Iceland will get around to him before long. The Icelandic literary tradition is of course illustrious, but nearly all the medieval sagas and poems that are its capital glory remain anonymous. Before Laxness emerged, prodigiously and prolifically (his career began in 1920, when he published his first novel, *Child of Nature*, at the age of seventeen), Iceland had never produced a modern writer of anything like international reputation. He has been translated into more than thirty languages.

Like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, with which it shares family resemblances, *Independent People* in its opening pages evokes the dawn of time. García Márquez's novel commences on a blue morning when the boulders in a

streambed look like dinosaur eggs. *Independent People's* first chapter summons up the days when the world was first settled, in 874 A.D.—for that is the year when the Norsemen arrived in Iceland, and one of the books wry conceits is that no other world but Iceland exists. The tale takes place among farmers habitually so impoverished that they “died without ever having transacted a business deal involving more than a few dollars at a time.” These are men who might venture outside their valleys once or twice a year, hiking to a little fishing village to purchase a few provisions; for them, even Reykjavik is a misty dream.

The book is set in the early decades of the twentieth century but the dates of individual events are hazy. *Independent People* is a pointedly timeless tale. It reminds us that life on an Icelandic croft had scarcely altered over a millennium; the seasons shifted, but the overall pattern of want and hardship and stoicism endured. Midway through the novel, however, off at an unimaginable distance, something called the Great War erupts. Normally, there would be nothing noteworthy in this (on the Continent, people were forever “hacking one another to pieces like suet in a trough”), but this time the conflict lifts to unprecedented heights the prices for Icelandic mutton and wool. Even the poorest of farmers begin dreaming of an emancipation from their tight, tethered poverty.

War or no war, freedom has always been the aim of the book's hero, Bjartur. When the story begins, he has just finished slaving for eighteen years on the farm of a man he despises, the bailiff of the district, in order to save money enough to purchase a pitifully modest holding, Summerhouses, and a handful of sheep. Bjartur of Summerhouses views the Great War coldly and gratefully: “I only hope they keep it up as long as they can.” Ultimately, though, he cannot concern himself with the “madmen” in the South—or with most of the people around him. Of far more significance are his sheep. On their welfare his world depends. He is fighting his own World War, at once the most significant and the most risible conflict on the globe—the smallest war ever fought. He is a “generalissimo” whose troops consist purely of a dog that helps him with his sheep.

His existence is less simple than it looks, however. For his world of everyday deprivation, like that of García Márquez's peasants, is encircled by a zone of enchantments. At the edges of life, magic is always afoot—although in Bjartur's case, all magic is black magic; the miraculous is no less malign than the mundane. Hence, his combat is two-tiered. He contends with the hostility of nature. And he contends with supernature—a curse. Long ago, the valley in which Summerhouses lies was inhabited by a murderous, blood-drinking witch, the fiend Gunnvor, who formed an unholy alliance with the infernal spirit Kolumkilli. She was eventually brought to justice (she was dismembered), but her scheming spirit still blights the valley. To propitiate her, it is customary for passersby to place a rock on the cairn devoted to her memory. But not Bjartur, who scorns the “nonsense these old wives let their heads be stuffed with.”

Gunnvor and Kolumkilli embody an unholy—an infernal—marriage, and it would seem that one legacy of their union is the withering of romantic alliances in the solitary valley where Summerhouses stands. Bjartur marries twice. His first wife, a furtively miserable woman, evidently agreed to move into his hovel only because she was, unbeknownst to him, pregnant by the son of the hateful bailiff. She dies in childbirth, alone. His second wife, a sickly, broken-spirited woman who during the dark arctic winters scarcely rises from her bed, eventually collapses and dies after a horrific, famished spring.

Occasionally it is borne in upon Bjartur that his women are torturously unhappy. He senses uneasily that they, perhaps in response to his crushing, ruthless drive for self-sufficiency, have reserved some sector of their minds he cannot reach. But in time there comes to Bjartur a different sort of romance, a new form of “marriage.” The child of his first wife survives its mother's death and Bjartur rears it as his own. This child, granddaughter to the bailiff, belongs to the “enemy.” But it turns out that Bjartur, for all his aloofness, harbors a clumsy warmth toward infants; he views them with some of the same tenderness he feels toward baby lambs. Looking down for the first time at this newborn girl, he

Marvelled that it could be so small and delicate. “You can't really expect it to be much of a thing,” he

added apologetically, “the way mankind is such a sorry affair when you come to look at it as it actually is.”

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He bestows on her, just the same, a lofty name: Asta Sollilja, or Beloved Sun-lily. She becomes his souls “one flower.”

In time, Bjartur’s sun-lily reaches the gangling verge of womanhood. When she is about thirteen, he guides her for the first time across the downs. After hours of trudging, she beholds, far off, a “strange blue color” that “seemed to embrace all the mysteries of distance.” She has to ask her father what it might be. It is the ocean, he tells her.

“Isn’t there anything on the other side, then?” she asked finally.

“The foreign countries are on the other side,” replied her father, proud of being able to explain such a vista. “The countries that they talk about in books,” he went on, “the kingdoms.”

They enter a fishing village and put up in a raucous and squalid lodging house, where they must share a bed. In the night, the frightened girl reaches innocently for her father and he, for a moment, responds to her sexually—he places a hand on her bare leg.

Aghast at himself, Bjartur leaps from bed and insists they strike off immediately for home. His daughter, having sensed nothing sexual in his touch, is thoroughly mystified. But Bjartur will henceforth see to it that nothing like a sexual exchange arises between them. Their “marriage” must be altogether virtuous.

Asta’s virtue soon crumbles, though. She becomes pregnant at the age of fifteen. On learning of the girl’s condition, Bjartur strikes her and expels her from his home.

So Asta sets out on her own, in an icy rain, in the middle of the night. She’s a fanciful child even yet, dreaming of a lover who owns “lands with sun-gilded palm-avenues.” But she will discover before the freezing dawn that her papery shoes are ripped to shreds and she is friendless in the wide world. Still, she never thinks of retreating, of begging Bjartur for another chance. For it turns out that she, no less than this father of hers who is not her true father, nurtures a proud independence. Somehow she will get by.

Years pass. Bjartur had always perceived himself as a soldier whose “war” concerned sheep, but it turns out that the true conflict of the book is between father and daughter. Asta is the only person in the world who has ever managed to penetrate Bjartur’s leatherlike skin. She is an irresistible force. But he is an immovable object. And how (the reader is left continually wondering) can two such ever be reconciled?

I first picked up *Independent People* with faint misgivings, somewhat put off by both its title and its subtitle, *An Epic*. (In the original, the book is called *Sjálfstsett Folk*—literally, Self-standing Folk—which doubtless is more inviting.) I feared I was about to encounter an uplifting story composed in a firm nationalistic tenor—a rousing testament to the valiant and indomitable Icelandic temperament. Was this going to be a land of too much steeliness and too little irony?

But one needn’t read very far to perceive Bjartur’s utter unsuitability as any symbol of a nation’s virtues. He’s far too quirky and crusty for that. And too big a fool. The book is as much mock as genuine epic. When Bjartur and his dog first stride into the valley, and he utters the first word of the novel—“No”—it’s clear that he’s a poor man’s Odysseus and his worm- and lice-infested dog is a cut-rate Argos.

Partly out of love for the book, I’ve now spent, all told, a year and a half in Iceland and I’ve met Laxness a few times. The first occasion was in 1986. He was then in his mid-eighties and growing confused and forgetful. When I spoke of my admiration for Bjartur, a look of perplexity gave way to one of alarm. “Oh, but he’s so stupid!” he objected.

“Oh, but he’s so *wonderfully* stupid!” I replied, and the old man peered at me and pondered darkly a moment; then his features cleared, and he abruptly laughed with pleasure.

Bjartur is a man who seemingly can hold in his head but one ideal—financial independence, the belief that “he

who pays his way is a king.” In his eyes, abstract speculation is a pastime for layabouts. At the rim of his thinking, ~~though, other notions—strange ideas with arresting cadences—are forever seething. Gradually—almost shyly—the~~ novel reveals that Bjartur is something of a poet. His verses, not surprisingly, have little to say. He’s a man in a perpetual muddle, who can expect to find no clarity in his lines. No, Bjartur comes to poetry, as to everything else, in search of a task to be fulfilled. He is enamored of the old *rimur* of traditional Icelandic verse, with its obscure kennings and intricate forms: “His poetry was technically so complex that it could never attain any noteworthy content; and thus it was with his life itself.”

Bjartur is for me one of the great twentieth-century literary characters—one of the immortals, like Humbert Humbert or Jay Gatz/Gatsby or Gregor Samsa or the four Makioka sisters. He is petty-minded and heroic; brutal and poetic; cynical and childlike. All these traits crystallize magnificently in the book’s great storm scene, in which Bjartur, gone off in search of a missing sheep, gets caught in a blizzard. Before it’s through, the storm will impose on Bjartur near-legendary trials. In the dead of the howling night, seeking to stay conscious, he turns to a characteristic refuge:

Seldom had he recited so much poetry in any one night; he had recited all his fathers poetry, all the ballads he could remember, all his own palindromes backwards and forwards in forty-eight different ways, whole processions of dirty poems, one hymn that he had learned from his mother, and all the lampoons that had been known in the Fourthing from time immemorial about bailiffs, merchants, and sheriffs.

Ultimately, it’s a question of whether poetry—in combination with sheer cantankerousness—will suffice to keep Bjartur alive. He is reduced in the end to all fours, like the sheep he has searched for in vain:

He forced his way at first with lowered head against the storm, but when he reached the ridge above the gully, he could no longer make any headway in this fashion, so he slumped forward on to his hands and knees and made his way through the blizzard on all fours, crawling over stony slopes and ridges like an animal, rolling down the gullies like a peg; barehanded, without feeling.

At this moment, Bjartur might well consider himself alone in all the world. Were he to succumb to the blizzard, no one would know even where to search for his body. Indeed, he is still more alone than he realizes, since his wife—his first wife—is lying dead at home; she has bled to death in giving birth to Asta Sollilja.

Nonetheless, there is someone who has Bjartur uppermost in his mind—his maker, Laxness, who feels toward his creation so potent a blend of affection and exasperation that the books every page reverberates with the tension. And the reader, too, is tracking Bjartur’s every struggling step. For by the time you’ve passed through the storm with him, it’s almost impossible not to be rooting for that monomaniacal, unlovable, wonderfully stupid old bastard, Bjartur of Summerhouses.

When I tell people I meet that my favorite book by a living novelist is Halldór Laxness’s *Independent People* and am asked what its about, my reply is, “Sheep.” This is a story (I continue) in which farmers are forever analyzing sheep and examining sheep: it’s about tapeworm in sheep and lungworm in sheep and diarrhea in sheep. Whatever virtues the novel boasts, it’s bereft of glamour.

My reply is actually less facetious than might first appear, for while the book does keep large issues constantly in mind (the largest: mortality and memory and love and duty), it is also very much about dung and sheep-parasites; it sets the reader vividly, unforgettably, upon a farm. In Bjartur’s household, there are no separate quarters for the animals, whose stinks and bleatings infiltrate even the dreams of the family. Any discoursing on the novel’s grander intentions must begin with the total, tactile claims of the land.

What is *Independent People* about? Like any big, great novel, it encourages a reader, earnestly wrestling with its scope, to encapsulate it into a single overarching theme. And like most big, great novels, it is varied enough that all such attempts soon come undone. I've already said that at the heart of the book lies a war between father and daughter. But perhaps there is a still more pivotal subject: the war waged within a single spirit. *Independent People* presents the most gripping depiction I've ever encountered of the gradual, daily contraction of a human soul and its eventual salvation.

For in his victory over multiple adversity, in his slow and carefully husbanded prosperity, Bjartur somehow loses everything of import in his life. Near the close of the novel, he finds that he has attained his greatest dream—he has wealth enough to build a “proper home”—and he discovers his triumph is empty. Not only are both of his wives dead, but his children have died as well, or moved off. Finally Gvendur, his middle son—the boy he feels closest to—announces that he is emigrating to America. Bjartur is so disgusted he does not even rise from the trench where he's working in order to bid his son farewell.

And Bjartur is still standing in the mud when, a moment later, the entire novel realigns itself. Infinitesimally, everything turns. The book has presented the reader with cataclysmic events—deaths, betrayals, storms, love affairs—but when it reaches its climacteric, the narrative could hardly be quieter:

Thus did he lose his last child as he stood deep in a ditch at that stage in his career when prosperity and full sovereignty were in sight, after the long struggle for independence that had cost him all his other children. Let those go who wish to go, probably it's all for the best. The strongest man is he who stands alone.... He had taken to his digging again. Then all at once some new thought struck him; throwing down his spade, he swung himself on to the bank; the boy had got a short distance away over the marshes.

“Hey,” cried the father, and hurried after him until he caught up with him. “Didn't you say something about Asta Sollilja last night?”

“I was talking about giving her my sheep if you didn't want to buy them.”

“Oh, I see,” said his father, as if he had not remembered the connection. “Oh well, good-bye then....”

Bjartur may not yet realize it, but his life's underpinnings have been removed. He has vowed to have nothing more to do with Asta Sollilja (Hasn't she betrayed his trust? What matters it to him if she may be dying of consumption?), and he is a man who holds to his word absolutely. And yet he has, minutely, given way. He doesn't quite know what is the nature of that irresistible force Asta Sollilja embodies (it is love), but the immovable object that is his own soul has been budged.

Bjartur's soul dilates as slowly as it has heretofore narrowed. He is a man of resolute obliquity, who would never directly admit that he was wrong to have rejected Asta when she most needed him. So, as any wooer might, Bjartur begins his overtures toward Asta with a poem, which is delivered by Gvendur. It is an impacted verse of just the sort that Bjartur admires—tightly rhymed and alliterated—in which he speaks of a stone and of a flower that has “fled.” Asta Sollilja disdains the verses: “And tell him that I also know the empty, drivelling doggerel that he cudgels into shape with hands and feet. But I, I am engaged to a young man who loves me. He has been to school, and he is a modern poet.”

Modern poetry? Contemptibly lax in Bjartur's eyes: “It's just like diarrhea. End-rhymes and nothing more.” But merely so “no one shall say of me that I couldn't write in these simple modern measures,” he prepares a second, more plainspoken poem for Asta, again to be delivered by Gvendur, and adds a postscript: “No, while there's a breath of life left in me, nothing will make me go to her.” And a second postscript: “But if I die, you can tell her from me that she may gladly lay me out.”

Asta declares that she “can't be bothered to listen to it,” and yet attends to it all the same. She then flies into a tirade—“while there's a breath of life left in me, nothing will ever make me go back to Bjartur of Summerhouses,”

but she, too, has an afterthought: “when I’m dead he may gladly bury my carrion for all that I care.”

~~Well—the two warring spirits already are largely reconciled. They are united eternally; in consigning their bones to each other, they have pledged their bond in the hereafter. It is merely in the little, fleeting business of life that they’re unworkably at odds—and the generous, ingenious way in which Laxness renders the unworkable workable, effecting a reconciliation between father and daughter, constitutes the most intricate and moving scene in this most intricate and moving novel.~~

So brilliantly drawn are Bjartur and Asta that they risk overshadowing the book’s every other character. But with each rereading of the novel (six, and counting), I find myself marveling at just how accomplished is the entire supporting cast. There’s the credulous, book-loving Olafur of Yztidale, whose idolization of the printed word is such that he cannot conceive of a misprint; after consulting his almanac, he confidently announces to a group of fellow farmers that next year’s Easter will fall on a Saturday. And there’s the querulous Reverend Gudmundur, who “had bigoted opinions on every subject, but changed them immediately if anyone agreed with him.”

Even better—as good, in their way, as Bjartur and Asta—are Bjartur’s third son, Little Nonni, and Nonni’s grandmother. In this valley overlain by a supernatural curse, these two provide enchantment from a contrary, benign source. They are creatures straight out of a sunny fairy tale: he the enchanted third son, the dreamer, the one whose destiny is threaded with magic; and she the timeless, ageless crone, given to queer, perhaps vatic, pronouncements, who serves as fairy godmother.

They, too, have a “marriage” of sorts. They are not merely sleeping companions; they complete each other—give to each other some quality without which life would be lacking. For Nonni, the old woman represents a feminine clemency and a patient approval which he lost catastrophically with the death of his mother. For the old woman, there is the suspicion that Nonni alone hears her, as she mumbles and maunders through her day; he ties her to the land of the living. It isn’t as though the boy is actively listening to her prayers and her chants and her aphorisms. But the sounds of her voice are shaping him forever.

How do we know her voice will stay with him? You might think Nonni’s future would be a blank, given that he emigrates to America while still a boy, vanishing from our story. But as befits his status as the enchanted child of the fairy tale, Nonni is accorded special treatment within the narrative. Toward him alone, the novel repeatedly looks forward: “And when later in life he thought of those days ...,” “all his life through he remembered it, meditating upon it in secret...”... the boy knew it well enough to remember it his whole life through.”

Before she died, Nonni’s mother invested her son with a task whose implications neither he nor she fully understood:

“Listen, my dear,” she said then, “I dreamed something about you the other night.”

“Me?”

“I dreamed that the elf-lady took me into the big rock and gave me a bowl of milk and told me to drink it, and when I had drunk it the elf-lady said: “Be good to little Nonni, because when he grows older he will sing for the whole world.”

But what can these stirring words, *sing for the whole world*, possibly mean to a little, ignorant Icelandic farm boy and his miserable, landlocked mother? Nonni knows only that this quest involves foreign countries, and when the opportunity to emigrate arises, he seizes it without hesitation. Slip of a boy though he may be, he approaches with gravity the maternal duty imposed by the elf-lady.

So Nonni disappears—only to remain. For he manages, present or absent, to suffuse the novel’s every page: this boy who “in years that were yet to come ... relived this memory in song” is the presiding genius of the book. He departs from the valley that he might learn to sing—and though the authorial hints are subtle, they also look unmistakable: Nonni has ventured forth in the world in order to write books like ... like *Independent People*. Whether

or not Nonnis boyhood circumstances mesh with Laxness, he is a clear stand-in for the author. Quietly, almost parenthetically, Laxness remarks of Nonni that he is fated to become “greater than all other Icelanders.” Its a roundabout and comely act of self-assertion.

Nonnis personality is set off strikingly by his older brother, Helgi, his souls dark twin. The two boys are “complementary antitheses.” They are both philosophers, given to elongated musings about religion and what would happen if time were to stop. But while the older boy is the unquestioned leader, a seeming tower of physical strength, it is he and not Nonni who will crack and shatter in the end. Nonni’s softness will, paradoxically, protect him, for in his dreaminess lies his refuge from life’s cruelty and rapacity. Helgi comes undone at his mother’s death. Nothing, not even prayer to the elves in the rocks, will restore her, and he arrives, in his earnest boy-philosophers way, at a terrifying nihilism. He claims to have seen Kolumkilli, the ghost-spirit who haunts the valley:

“And do you know why I see him?” continued the other. Gripping little Nonni’s wrists, he held them fast as he whispered into his face: “Its because I’m dead too. Nonni, look at me closely, look into my eyes. You see a dead man.”

Helgi will nearly destroy the farm—bring ruination upon them all—before disappearing in the snow in a murky act of suicide. The presiding witch of the valley, Kolumkilli’s bloodthirsty mate Gunnvor, has claimed another victim. It seems the cycle is never to be broken. And yet little Nonni carries within himself the seeds of a magic greater than that of any fiend: he is, dawningly, the poet, the tale-bearer, the bard. The independent people of Nonni’s family will be redeemed by *Independent People*. He will rescue them all through the high-soaring sorcery of Art.

When Laxness buoyantly referred to himself, by way of a stand-in, as “greater than all other Icelanders,” he was making a claim that in time would become so overwhelmingly true as to look like an understatement. Given Iceland’s tiny size and its subordinate role in modern history (it did not declare independence from Denmark until 1944), its hardly surprising that Laxness is generally perceived not only as the country’s foremost artist of the century, but as its most influential citizen. He looms larger than any modern statesman or religious figure. Not merely through his fiction but through his journalism and essays and political stands, he has shaped the mores of his rapidly changing nation.

The reader who comes, unexpectedly, on the book of his life is apt to feel that nobody else fully appreciates it. This is an illogical feeling, of course—but why should our passion for books show any more sense than our passion for people? I’m continually having to rein in a boastful suspicion that I alone am *Independent People*’s ideal reader ...

Reality has a helpful way of humbling such notions. Laxness once told me an anecdote that had obviously been heartening him for years. One day a taxi pulled up to his farm and a stranger emerged. It was an American who was in a rush (he had come from the airport, during a layover between flights) but who hadn’t wanted to miss this opportunity to shake the hand of the man who had written *Independent People*.

Keflavik airport lies some sixty miles from Laxness’s farm. Cab fare for a round-trip journey of a hundred twenty miles would have cost a fortune—today it would run you about two hundred dollars. Such a pilgrimage is easy to classify. It’s the extravagant gesture of someone who feels he understands a great novel better than anyone else on the planet.

Brad Leithauser

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# ***Book One***





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**PART I**

***Icelandic Pioneer***



## KOLUMKILLI

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IN early times, say the Icelandic chronicles, men from the Western Islands came to live in the country, and when they departed, left behind them crosses, bells, and other objects used in the practice of sorcery. From Latin sources may be learned the names of those who sailed here from the Western Islands in the early days of the Papacy. Their leader was Kolumkilli, the Irish, a sorcerer of wide repute. In those days there was great fertility of the soil in Iceland. But when the Norsemen came to settle here, the Western sorcerers were forced to flee the land, and old writings say that Kolumkilli, determined on revenge, laid a curse on the invaders, swearing that they would never prosper here, and more in the same spirit, much of which has since, to all appearances, been fulfilled. Later in history the Norsemen in Iceland began to stray from their true beliefs and to embrace the idolatries of unrelated peoples. Then there was chaos throughout the land; the gods of the Norsemen were held to derision, and new gods and new saints were introduced, some from the east and some from the west.

The chronicles tell how at this time a church was built to Kolumkilli in the valley where later stood the bigging Albogastathir on the Moor. This in the old days had been the residence of a chieftain. Much information relating to this moorland valley was collected by Sheriff Jón Reykdalin of Rauthsmýri after the bigging was last destroyed in the great spectral visitation of the year 1750. The Sheriff himself both saw and heard the sundry unnatural happenings that took place there, as is shown in his well-known Account of the Albogastathir Fiend. The ghost was heard chanting aloud in the bigging from Mid-Thorri to well past Whitsuntide when the folk fled; twice he named his name in the Sheriff's ear, but answered all other questions with "odious Latin verses and shameless obscenities."

Of the many stories that have been told of this lonely bigging in its moorland valley, the most remarkable is undoubtedly one which dates back to long before the days of Sheriff Jón, and it may not be out of place to recall it for the pleasure of such people as have not fared along the level stretches by the river, where the centuries lie side by side in unequalled overgrown paths cut by the horses of the past; or of those who may wish to visit the old site on the hillock in the marshes as they make their way through the valley.

It could not have been later than towards the end of Bishop Gudbrandur's ministry that a certain couple farmed Albogastathir on the Moor. The husband's name is not chronicled, but the wife was called Gunnvor or Gudvor, a woman of a most forceful nature, reputed to be skilled in occult lore and capable of changing her form. Her husband, who appears to have been the most craven-hearted of wretches, had little freedom, being kept completely under her domination.

They did not prosper greatly in their husbandry to begin with, and few indeed were the work-people they kept. Legend says that the woman, because of their poverty and their many offspring, forced her husband to carry their new-born children out into the desert and leave them there to die. Some he laid under flat rocks on the mountain; their wails may still be heard in early spring about the time when the snow thaws. To others he tied stones, then sank them in the lake, whence their weeping may yet be heard in the mid-winter moonlight, especially in frost or before a storm.

But as the mistress Gunnvor grew older in years, says the story, she began to thirst greatly for human blood. And she hungered for human marrow. It is even said that she took the

blood of her surviving children and drank it with her mouth. She had a scaffold built for incantation behind the house, where in fire and reek she used to chant to the fiend Kolumkilli on autumn evenings. It is said that her husband tried to escape and publish her evil doings abroad, but she pursued him and, overtaking him on Rauthsmyri Ridge, killed him with stones and mutilated his corpse. She carried his bones home to her scaffold, but the flesh and the bowels she left behind for the ravens, and had it given out in the district that he had perished while searching the mountains for sheep that had strayed.

From that day forward the mistress Gunnvor began to prosper, and everyone believed that it was due to her evil compact with Kolumkilli, and soon she was the owner of many good horses.

There was much journeying through the district in those days, both in the summertime when men went to the fishing undei Jokull, and in the springtime, when men journeyed from afar to Jokull to buy their stockfish. As time went on, however, it was rumoured throughout the district that the more horses Gunnvor acquired, the less hospitable towards the travellers did she grow, and though she was a woman who attended church regularly, as was the custom in that age, it is told in the Annals that on Whit Sunday she could not see the sun in a cloudless sky after the service at Rauthsmyri Church.

Rumours now began to be whispered abroad concerning the fate of Gunnvor's husband, and how she murdered men, some for their possessions, others for their blood and marrow, and rode after some on the mountains. Now, there lies in the valley, to the south but not at a great distance from the bigging, a stagnant lake called Igulvatn, which name it bears to this day. The mistress killed her guests in the middle of the night, and this was the manner of their death: she attacked them with a short sword as they slept, bit them in the throat and drank their blood, then, after dismembering their bodies, used their bones as playthings for herself and the fiend Kolumkilli. Some she pursued over the moors and assailed with her sword, and brightly flashed the blade as she made an end of them. In strength she was the equal of any man, and she had in addition the help of the Devil. Clots of blood may still be seen in the snow on the ridges, especially before Yule. She bore their carrion down into the valley and sank it in the lake, after tying stones to it. Then she stole their possessions, the clothes and horses and money, if any. Her children were idiots all and would bark from the housetop like any dog, or squat in imbecility on the paving and bite men, for the Fiend had deprived them of common sense and human tongue. To this very day this lullaby is sung in the districts on both sides of the high moors:

*Guest of Gunnvor was one man,*

*With pony of price,*

*Through his heart her sword she ran,*

*Lullahalulla,*

*Running blood reddens the blade,*

*Lullábabalulla.*

*Guest of Gunnvor was no man*

*With God or good grace,*

*She has broken my rib-bone, my leg-bone, my hip-bone,*

*Lullabalulla,*

*Running blood reddens the blade,*

*If Kolumkilli call me should,*

*This is what he'd say:*

*Bones and red blood, bones and red blood,*

*And dododo,*

*Runs the blood in a flood,*

*So lullababalulla.*

But in the end it came to pass that Gunnvor's vile practices were unmasked. She had been the bane of many—men, women, and children alike—and had chanted at night to the fiercest Kolumkilli. She was condemned at the district moot and broken at the lich-gate of Rauthsmyri Church on Trinity Sunday. Then she was dismembered, and last of all her head was cut off and she took her death well, but cursed men with strange curses. Her trunk, head, and limbs were gathered into a skin bag, which was borne up to the ridge to the west of Albogastathir and buried in a cairn at the highest point. The cairn may be seen to this day, now overgrown with grass below and called latterly Gunnucairn. The people say that there will be no misfortune if the traveller cast a stone on to the cairn on the first occasion that he crosses the ridge, but some throw a stone each time they pass that way, and hope therewith to buy themselves immunity.

Troublesome as the mistress Gunnvor may have seemed in living life, she far surpassed her former evil conduct after her burial; she was considered to rest ill in the barrow and walked again at home on her farm. She woke up with her those several men whom she had destroyed, and folk at home in Albogastathir had little rest from disturbance once the night took to darkening. She resumed her former practices, tormenting living and dead alike, so that always there might be heard in the croft at night a loud yelling and howling as though flocks of tortured souls held lament on the roof and at the window because of their great misery and little rest. Sometimes it was as if the most powerful stench of brimstone erupted from the earth, filling the house with its gust so that men lay suffocating and dogs thrashed about as though mad. Sometimes Gunnvor rode the roof so that every timber shook, and in the end no building was thought safe from her evil pounding and shameful night-riding. She would climb on men's backs and on the backs of livestock and crush the cows; she would drive women and children mad and frighten old people, yielding neither to signs of the cross nor to magic spells. The story relates that finally the priest of Rauthsmyri was brought to lay hands on her and that she fled before his most admirable learning into the mountain, splitting it where a cleft is now to be seen. Some people say that she took up her habitation in the mountain, in which case it is not unlikely that it was in the form of a troll. Others believe that she lived much in the lake in the form of some kind of serpent or water-monster; and indeed it is on all men's lips that a monster has now for many generations inhabited the lake and appeared to countless witnesses, who have testified to it upon oath, even those without second sight. Some people say that this monster has destroyed the bigging Albogastathir thrice, other seven times, so that no husbandman had any peace there longer and the farm was laid waste because spectres in various likenesses continually disturbed it. So in the time of Sheriff Jon Reykdalin it was added to the lands of Rauthsmyri first as sheep-cotes for the winter, whence its later name of Winterhouses, but afterwards as a lambs' fold.

## THE HOLDING

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ON a knoll in the marshes stand the ruins of an old croft-house.

This knoll is perhaps only in a certain sense the work of nature; perhaps it is much rather the work of long dead peasants who built their homes there on the grassy bank by the brook generation after generation, one on the other's ruins. But for over a hundred years now it has been a lambs' fold; here ewes and their lambs have bleated for more than a hundred springs. Out from the fold and its knoll, mainly to the south, spread miles of marshland dotted here and there with islets of ling, and through Rauthsmyri Ridge a little river runs down into the marsh, and another from the lake in the east through the valleys of the eastern moors. To the north of the knoll towers a steep mountain, its lower slopes scarred with landslides, and the tongues between covered with heather. The crags soar up from the landslides in sheer castellations, and in one place above the fold the mountain is cloven by a gully in the basal part, and down from this gully in spring cascades a waterfall, long and slender. Sometimes the south wind blows the spray up over the brink again, so that the waterfall flows backwards. At the foot of the mountain boulders lie, scattered here and there. This lambs' fold, where once stood the bigging Albogastathir on the Moor, has for the past few generations been known as the Winterhouses.

A little brook runs down past the fold, runs in a semicircle round the home-field, clear and cold, and never fails. In summer the sunbeams play in its merry stream and the sheep lie on the bank chewing on the grass and stretches one foot out into the grass. On such a day the sky is blue and the sun shines brightly on the lake with its swans; and on the smooth flow of the trout river through the marshes. Heath and marshes hum with blithe song.

Ridges and high moorland enclose the valley on all sides. To the west lies a narrow ridge and the first farm beyond it is called Utirauthsmyri, Rauthsmyri, or simply Myri, the seat of the local Bailiff; this moorland valley has until now been part of his possessions. Broad land is widely farmed, open beyond Myri. The high heath in the east, over which lies the road down to the market town on the fjord, is considered a five hours' crossing with pack-horses. In the south, low undulating moors gradually rise in height until the Blue Mountains close the horizon, melting into the sky, it seems, in pious meditation, and rarely free of snow before St. John the Baptist's Day. And what lies beyond the Blue Mountains? Only the deserts of the land.

And the spring breezes blow up the valley.

And when the spring breezes blow up the valley; when the spring sun shines on last year's withered grass on the river banks; and on the lake; and on the lake's two white swans; and who coaxes the new grass out of the spongy soil in the marshes—who could believe on such a day that this peaceful, grassy valley brooded over the story of our past; and over its spectres. People ride along the river, along the banks where side by side lie many paths, cut one by one, century after century, by the horses of the past—and the fresh spring breeze blows through the valley in the sunshine. On such a day the sun is stronger than the past.

A new generation forgets the spectres that may have tormented the old.

How often has the bigging Albogastathir on the Moor been destroyed by spectres? And rebuilt, in spite of spectres? Century after century the lone worker leaves the settlements to tempt fortune on this knoll between the lake and the cleft in the mountain, determined

challenge the evil powers that hold his land in thrall and thirst for his blood and the marrow in his bones. Generation after generation the crofter raises his chant, contemptuous of the powers that lay claim to his limbs and seek to rule his fate to his dying day. The history of the centuries in this valley is the history of an independent man who grapples barehanded with a spectre which bears a new and ever a newer name. Sometimes the spectre is some half-divine fiend who lays a curse on his land. Sometimes it breaks his bones in the guise of a fiend. Sometimes it destroys his croft in the form of a monster. And yet, always, to all eternity, it is the same spectre assailing the same man century after century.

“No,” he said defiantly.

It was the man who was making for Albogastathir on the Moor a century and a half after the croft had last been destroyed. And as he passed Gunnvor’s cairn on the ridge, he spat, and spat out vindictively: “Damn the stone you’ll ever get from me, you old bitch,” and refused to give her a stone.

His movement was a response to the breeze, his gait in perfect harmony with the uneven land beneath his feet. A yellow dog was following him, a farm labourer’s dog with a slim muzzle, and full of lice, for she often threw herself down and bit herself passionately, rolling over and over between the tussocks with the strange, restless yelp peculiar to lousy dogs. She was starved of vitamins, for she stopped every now and again to eat grass. It was equally obvious that she was wormy. And the man turned his face into the fresh wind of spring. The sun shone on the flaunting manes of ancient horses and in the wind was the clapping of long-gone hoofs; they were the horses of the past in the bridle-paths along the river, century after century, generation after generation, and still the road was travelled—and now he, the newest landowner, Icelandic pioneer in the thirtieth generation, was treading it, dauntless as ever, with his dog. Halting on the path of the centuries, he ran his eyes over his valley in the sunshine of spring.

As soon as he halted the dog came fawning upon him. She stuck her slim muzzle between his hard paws, resting it there and wagging her tail and all her body, and the man gazed at the animal philosophically for a while, savouring, in the submissiveness of his dog, the consciousness of his own power, the rapture of command, and sharing, for a second, the human nature’s loftiest dream, like a general who looks over his troops and knows that with a word he can send them into the charge. A few moments passed thus, and now the dog was squatting on the withered grass on the bank before him, watching him with questioning eyes, and he replied: “Yes, whatever a man seeks he will find—in his dog.”

He went on discussing this subject after he had left the path and was making his way over the marshes towards the home-field, repeating it in various forms: “The things a dog seeks he finds in a man; seek and ye shall find.” Bending down, he felt at the spring grass of the marshes with his thick fingers and measured its length; then he uprooted a few blades from the boggy patch, and after wiping the mud from them on to his trousers, put them into his mouth, like a sheep, and thinking as he chewed, began thinking like a sheep. The taste was bitter, but he did not spit; he smacked his lips and savoured the rooty taste of it. “This stuff has saved many a life after a long winter and little hay,” he said to himself; “there is a sort of honey in it though it tastes strong. It is this young swamp grass that gives the sheep new life in the spring, you see; and the sheep gives man new life in the autumn.” And he went on talking about the swamp grass and mixing it up with philosophy and playing variations on the

theme till he had reached the home-field.

Standing on the highest point of the knoll, like a Viking pioneer who has found his high seat posts, he looked about him, then made water, first to the north in the direction of the mountain, then to the east, towards the marshy tracts and the lake and the river flowing smoothly from the lake through the marshes; then towards the moors in the south, where the Blue Mountains, still coated with snow, closed the horizon in meditation. And the sun shone from a cloudless sky.

Not far from him two Rauthsmyri sheep were cropping the green of the home-field, and although they were his master's sheep, he chased them off, cleared his own home-field for the first time. "This land is mine now," he said.

And then it seemed as if some misgiving gripped him; perhaps the land was not all paid for. Instead of allowing the dog to pursue the sheep, he called her to heel. And went on viewing the world from his own enclosure, the world he had just bought. Summer was just rising over this world.

It was for that reason that he said to the dog: "Winterhouses is no name for a farm like this, no name at all. And as for Albogastathir on the Moor—that's no name either; it's just another of these relics of old popery. Damn me if I'll have names that are bound up with spectres of the past on my farm. I was christened Bjartur, which ought to mean 'bright, So the farm shall be called Summerhouses."

And Bjartur of Summerhouses walked round his own home-field, inspecting the grass-grown ruins, scrutinizing the stonework in the walls of the lambs' fold, and pulling down and building up again, in imagination, the same sort of croft-house as he had been born and bred in across the eastern heaths.

"Size isn't everything by any means," he said aloud to the dog, as if suspecting her of entertaining high ideas. "Take my word for it, freedom is of more account than the height of a roof beam. I ought to know; mine cost me eighteen years' slavery. The man who lives on his own land is an independent man. He is his own master. If I can keep my sheep alive through the winter and can pay what has been stipulated from year to year—then I pay what has been stipulated; and I have kept my sheep alive. No, it is freedom that we are all after, Titla. He who pays his way is a king. He who keeps his sheep alive through the winter lives in a palace."

And when the bitch heard this, she too was happy. Now there were no more clouds. She raced in circles around him, barking frivolously, then slunk towards him with her muzzle on the ground, as if to pounce on him, and the next second had leaped away again and traced another circle.

"Now then," he said soberly, "no fooling here. Do I run in circles and bark? Do I lie down with my nose on the ground and tomfoolery in my eyes and go for folk? No, my independence has cost me dearer than that: eighteen years for the Bailiff at Rauthsrnyri and the poetess and Ingolfur Arnarson Jonsson, who they say has been sent to Denmark now. Was it maybe just for a picnic that I used to go and comb the mountains in the south there for their strays, with winter well on the way? No; and I've buried myself in snow. And it wasn't their fault, bless them, if I crawled out alive next morning."

At this reminder the dog's joy subsided considerably, and she sat down and took to biting herself.

“And no one will ever be able to say that I counted my footsteps in their service; and what’s more, I paid the first instalment on the farm on Easter morning as had been arranged. And I have twenty-five ewes fleeced and lambled; there’s many a one begun with less, and still more who have been other people’s slaves all their lives and never owned a stick. Take my father for instance. He lived to be eighty and never managed to pay off the miserable sick-loan the parish advanced him when he was only a youngster.”

The bitch contemplated him sceptically for a while, as if she didn’t really believe what he was saying. She thought of barking, but decided not to, and opened her jaws in a long yawn only, like a question.

“No, I didn’t think you would understand,” said Bjartur. “You dogs are pretty poor objects really, though on the whole I think we humans have even less to boast about. Still, things will go worse with us than I think, if my Rosa serves her folk with the bones of an old horse on Christmas Eve after twenty-three years of housekeeping here, as the poetess of Rauthsmýr thought fit to do, and that no longer ago than last year.”

The bitch had again begun biting herself passionately.

“Aye, no wonder their herd’s dog is lousy and eats the grass, when even their housekeeper hasn’t set eyes on the pantry-key for twenty years. And wouldn’t the horses he leaves out in winter tell a fine story, if only their tongues were loosened, poor brutes; and his sheep, too. It has been one eternal martyrdom for them all these years, and probably it’s just as well for some people that sheep don’t have a place on the judgment seat in heaven, poor brutes.”

The farm brook ran down from the mountain in a straight line for the fold, then swerved to the west to go its way down into the marshes. There were two knee-high falls in it and two pools, knee-deep. At the bottom there was shingle, pebbles and sand. It ran in many curves. Each curve had its own tone, but not one of them was dull; the brook was merry and musical, loving, like youth, but yet with various strings, and it played its music without thought of an audience and did not care though no one heard for a hundred years, like the true poet. The man examined it all closely. He halted by the upper fall and said: “Here she can wash off her socks and so on;” by the lower fall and said: “Here salt fish could be put to soak.” The dog stretched her head down to the water and lapped at it. The man lay flat on the bank, too, and drank, and some of the water went up his nose. “It’s first-rate water,” said Bjartur. The Summerhouses, looking at the dog as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “I could almost believe that it had been consecrated.”

Probably it occurred to him that with this observation he was exposing a chink in his armour to the unknown powers of evil that were popularly supposed to infest the valley, for all at once he turned about in the spring breeze, turned in a complete circle, and said in every direction:

“Not that it matters; the water could be unconsecrated for all I care. Of you I am unafraid, Gunnvor. Hard shall it go with you to oppose my good fortune, old hag, for spectres never daunted me yet.” He clenched his fists and with kindling eyes looked up at the mountain cleft, then at the ridge in the west, and then at the lake, still grinding out words of challenge between his teeth in saga style: “—And never shall!”

The bitch leaped up and, rushing madly at the sheep at the bottom of the knoll, started snapping viciously at their hocks, for she thought the man was angry, whereas he was only filled with the modern spirit and determination to be a free man on his own land, with the



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