

Codus criminalus: Missing persons and a lost boy

Some ten years ago I was walking around Reykjavík. It was a bright and beautiful spring day. My mobile phone rang. A young man introduced himself as a journalist from *Viðskiptablaðið* (a business weekly). He wanted to ask me a few questions about Arnaldur Indriðason. “Why is he so popular?”, he enquired. “Well, it’s the cold”, I answered at once (everybody knows how cold the bright days of spring are in Reykjavík), “and the desolation”, I added having looked around me, since even though I was walking in an old and densely populated neighbourhood there was not a living creature in sight.

Indeed, it is the setting that first comes to mind when I think of Arnaldur’s novels. Their setting is one of their main characteristics, it creates the crisp and distinct atmosphere that makes them so rich. Also important is how quiet they are, almost impassive. Before Arnaldur had gained international recognition I read an English pr page from his publisher where his novels were described as ‘fast paced thrillers’. I laughed aloud, not only at this ridiculous description but also at the misunderstanding involved, that to present Arnaldur’s books on these terms would be likely to increase their popularity. ‘Fast paced’ is quite simply not at all the case when it comes to Arnaldur’s writing.

Actually, this applies not only to Arnaldur’s stories. In some ways this applies to Nordic crime fiction in general. The popularity of the Nordic crime novel goes directly against all ideas of ‘light reading’, as well as against most general assumptions about what is likely to become popular. The majority of these novels are unhurried, almost depressing, dark, bleak, lonely, cold, filled with problematic social issues.

Þetta á reyndar ekki aðeins við um sögur Arnaldar, því margt af því sem hér kemur fram um þær á einnig við norrænar glæpasögur yfirleitt. Vinsældir norrænu glæpasögunnar ganga ekki aðeins þvert gegn öllum hugmyndum um ‘léttmeti’ heldur einnig gegn hefðbundnum hugmyndum um hvað vænlegt sé til vinsælda svona almennt séð. Upp til hópa eru þessar sögur hægar, eiginlega þunglyndislegar, myrkar, svartsýnar, einmanalegar, kuldalegar, fullar af félagslegum vandamálum ...¹

The Groke – or “a spirit without hope”

It was well into the evening but the sky was still bright. Erlendur looked out of the window. It would not get dark, either. He always missed that in the summer. Missed the darkness. Yearned for the cold black of night and the deep winter.²

It should come as no surprise to Arnaldur Indriðason’s readers that the detective Erlendur Sveinsson does not like the Icelandic summer light, or as it says in a poem by Ólína Jónasdóttir, referring to the autumn: “Fölnað hauður vel á við / vonarsnauðan anda” (“The pale earth is well suited / to the spirit without hope”). Erlendur is the main character of most of Arnaldur Indriðason’s crime novels. The other main characters are

¹ Interestingly enough the growing popularity of the Nordic crime novels is parallel to an increasing popularity of the ‘cosy-crime’ novel. More different versions of the crime novel are hardly possible.

² Arnaldur Indriðason, *The Draining Lake*, transl. Bernard Scudder, London, Vintage 2008 (2004/2007), p. 199.

his subordinates and team, Sigurður Óli and Elínborg. Winter is Erlendur's season, he prefers the dark and the cold that are so characteristic of most of Arnaldur's tales. This feature of Arnaldur's writing is evident right from the first page of his first novel: "It was a chilly January and the mighty building was bathed in gloom. It stood alone by the sea, surrounded by a large and dark thicket of trees" ("Það var frostkaldur janúar og nóturleikinn draup af voldugri byggingunni. Hún stóð ein niðri við hafið, umkringd stórum og dimmum trjágarði.")³ The building described is a psychiatric hospital and a suitable location for the beginning of events in *Sons of Dust* (*Synir duftsins* (1997)). Moreover, as the quote implies, the cold is everywhere, not only in the outward setting but also within the characters, including Erlendur himself. In fact, the description of the bleak psychiatric hospital rhymes with the image drawn of Icelandic society in general. This continual theme of cold and darkness hangs together with the description of Icelandic crimes often seen in Arnaldur's works:

[...] flest mál rannsóknarlögreglunnar snerust um algjöra smáglæpi. Mest var um innbrot í sjoppur. Innbrot á skrifstofur. Tölvuþjófnaðir voru mjög í tísku. Fjárdráttur starfsmanna í fyrirtækjum. Ömurlega óspennandi mál. Íslenskir glæpamenn voru yfirhöfuð afar ómerkilegir. [...] Íslenskir morðingjar voru fágætir og auðfundnir yfirleitt af því morð voru ekki framin af yfirlögðu ráði heldur af slysnri eða menn voru gripnir stundarbrjálæði.⁴

[...] the majority of the cases involved insignificant crimes. Most of them burgled newsagents. Burgled offices. Stealing computers was very fashionable. Embezzlement. Dismally uninteresting cases. Icelandic criminals were on the whole very petty. [...] Icelandic murderers were rare and usually easily found because most murders were not premeditated but the result of an accident or of momentary madness.

This is a pretty interesting description by an author who is here starting out as a crime writer. Arnaldur repeats a variation of this description in nearly every book since. During the last ten years or so his books have been secure in their place at the top of Icelandic bestseller lists, as well as gaining their author numerous foreign admirers and awards. It would seem clear that the phrase "dismally uninteresting cases" does not itself apply particularly well to Arnaldur's stories, even though this description is true of the murders he writes about. In most cases the crimes are indeed as indicated, and often it is only by coincidence that they do not get solved at once. Clearly a "dismally uninteresting case" can doubtlessly be the foundation for an interesting and exciting novel.

In Icelandic as well as non-Icelandic reviews of Arnaldur's books, two elements are often emphasised: cold and bleakness. These are certainly the tones of the setting of the novels and the emotional scale pursued by the author. However, it must not be forgotten that Arnaldur's works also contain subtle yet rich humour, a quality which is important for their readability and addictiveness. Erlendur is given a deep black sense of humour, at times matching that of Huggleikur Dagsson's mean minimalistic comics. On the other

³ Arnaldur Indriðason, *Synir duftsins*, Reykjavík, Vaka-Helgafell 2003 (1997), p. 11. Transl. úd.

⁴ Ibid, p. 75.

hand, Elínborg tends to be rather serious and is not given to irresponsible talk, whilst Sigurður Óli often blurts out things that are not politically correct but reflect the opinions of many. Sigurður's role is partly to lighten the atmosphere during the investigation of difficult cases.⁵

Break for some History

When Arnaldur Indriðason's first novel, *Sons of Dust*, was published in 1997, crime writing was not practiced in Iceland, even though translated crime stories were common. Arnaldur was at this time a journalist and a film critic for *Morgunblaðið* ('the morning paper'), at that time Iceland's biggest newspaper. He was 36 years old and had never published fiction, at least not formally.

It was clear from this first book that Arnaldur's intention was to write a series of crime novels, a string of books in the same vein as works by the Swedish authors Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö who together wrote ten novels about their team of cops. Even though Erlendur and Sigurður Óli were not really the main investigators in this first case, it was obvious that this was a foundation for further characterisation. Elínborg is briefly mentioned in the first novel and has a slightly bigger role in the second, *Silent Kill* (*Dauðarósir* (1998)). Since *Jar City* (*Mýrin* (2000)) she has become a permanent member of the team. Eva Lind, Erlendur's daughter and a drug addict, is introduced graphically in *Sons of Dust* but the alcoholic son, Sindri Snær, is not seen fully characterised until *Silent Kill*, even though he is mentioned in the first book. Erlendur and Sigurður Óli both make a cameo appearance in *Operation Napoleon* (*Napóleonskjölin* (1999)). That novel is, however, not a part of the 'Erlendur' series and is more of a thriller. Two other of Arnaldur's works are outside of the series, the noir *Betty* (2003) (where Erlendur is actually mentioned once) and the historical thriller *Codus Regius* (*Konungsbók* (2006)).⁶ Arnaldur is fully in charge of the police story form in *Jar City* and starts working more pointedly with his characters and their lives, and as regular readers know, Arnaldur devotes more time to his characters as the series progresses. This applies primarily to Erlendur, and from *Voices* (*Röddin* (2002)) his role as a character in the novels becomes more prominent. Two books, *Hypothermia* (*Harðskafi* (2007)) and *Strange Shores* (*Furðustrandir* (2010)), are in fact more or less solely about him, particularly the latter. The first novels appear to take place with approximately a calendar year between them but subsequent novels are set over a much narrower time frame. It came as a surprise to me that after *Jar City* (which is set in October 2001, even though it was published in November 2000), events pick up pace and the last four books, *Hypothermia*, *Outrage* (*Myrká* (2008)), *Black Skies* (*Svörtuloft* (2009)) and *Strange Shores* all take place during more or less the same period of time, around the middle of the first decade of this century.⁷ Clearly things occur more rapidly in the world of Erlendur and Co. or, depending on your viewpoint, more slowly.

⁵ Sigurður Óli's role as a comic relief was much used in the film *Jar City* (Baltasar Kormákur 2006).

⁶ Since this article was written, a new novel outside the series has been published.

⁷ The time frame does not quite add up as far as I can see. *Jar City* is set in October 2001, *Silence of the Grave* in April 2002, *Voices* at Christmas 2002, *The Draining Lake* seems to be set the following summer,

The mysterious Marion Briem appears first in *Jar City* and other characters wonder if Marion is female or male. Erlendur is silent on this matter (as is Arnaldur) and when Marion dies in the novel *Arctic Chill* (*Vetrarborgin* (2005)) the character has not been given a clear gender. (It might be added that this textual game involving playing with gender roles reaches a certain climax in *Betty*.) Erlendur meets a woman, Valgerður, in *Voices*, and she appears briefly in the subsequent books.

Missing persons is a prevalent theme in all of the novels, starting in *Sons of Dust*. In fact such cases are discussed right after the already quoted description by Arnaldur of Icelandic crimes: “There were cases of unexplained missing persons and they seemed to be on the increase.” (“Til voru dæmi um óútskýrð mannhvörf og þeim virtist fara fjölgandi.”)⁸ Erlendur takes cases of missing persons seriously, as well as identifying with the loss and sorrow associated with them. The bleakness of missing persons and the lack of official interest in them is reflected in the chilly description of Icelandic murders. In most cases this description applies quite well to the killings committed in Arnaldur’s books. Here it is worth mentioning that the crime which has proven to be one of the most difficult to solve in the last few decades, the so-called case of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur, is in fact a missing person case. However, it is not until *Silence of the Grave* (*Grafarþögn* (2001)) that the story of Erlendur’s missing brother is told, but he went missing in a blizzard when they were boys.

The Saga of Erlendur

When Erlendur tells Eva Lind, as she lies in a coma, about the disappearance of his brother, this immediately tells the reader many things about his character, for example, the fact that he is unable to open up to people under ordinary circumstances. Previously it had repeatedly been made clear that Erlendur is very interested in missing persons and Icelandic stories about hardships suffered when travelling in uncharted country. He himself disappeared from his wife and two children, apparently almost without saying goodbye. This marred his relationship with his children, as his wife refused him access to them. He allowed her to have her way in this matter, which means he does not really get to know his children until they are teenagers, and by this time they are both addicts. The early trauma in his life also seems to affect his relationship with other women, as seen in the way he treats Valgerður. Even though he seems to be having some kind of a love affair with her he does not hesitate to leave her without a word at the end of the book *Hypothermia*, when he takes off into his final search for his brother’s remains.

This emphasis on the personal issues of policemen is well in line with the tradition of crime fiction and police stories that Arnaldur’s work adheres to. To put it concisely, such stories became popular in the 1960s, and the best known examples in Iceland are the books by the Swedish writing team Sjöwall and Wahlöö. They are marked by the simple fact that the police work and the social position and placement of the police officers are no less issues in the stories than the crime cases themselves. In addition, the private lives

2003, *Arctic Chill* in January the next year, 2004, and the *Hypothermia*-quartet the autumn of that year. However, there seems to be a year missing, because the *Hypothermia*-quartet is set in 2005.

⁸ *Synir duftsins*, p. 75. Transl. úd.

of the police officers provides much material for the narrative.⁹ Less known today, but no less important for Arnaldur's writing, are the Belgian crime novels by Georges Simenon, about the loner Maigret. The first of these was published in 1931.¹⁰

In her article, "Erlendur's Family Tree" ("Hverra manna er Erlendur?") (2003), Kristín Árnadóttir says: "When the Erlendur novels are examined as a whole a certain development is apparent [...] in Erlendur's character" ("Þegar sögurnar um Erlend eru skoðaðar sem heild kemur í ljós ákveðin þróun í frásögninni [...] hvað varðar persónu Erlends").¹¹ When this article was written, *Voices* was the most recent novel. As it turns out, this notion of a collection of novels forming a cohesive whole has become even stronger, to the point where the series is a kind of Saga of Erlendur. This feeling of cohesiveness is mainly grounded in Erlendur's character, less on other characters or chains of events or even the story.

Erlendur is a loner and avoids human contact, feeling more at ease when among his books, all of which are about missing persons and hardships suffered when journeying through the Icelandic countryside in all weathers. Such books have actually always been very popular in Iceland and are still so, the best known example is a series called *Hrakningar og heiðavegir* (Hardships and mountain roads). Erlendur's love for books does, however, not appear right from the beginning, but it would seem that his character absorbs some characteristics of the second hand bookseller Pálmi, who is the main character of *Sons of Dust*. Pálmi is also rather reclusive although that seems to change by the end of the novel. Pálmi does not appear again in Arnaldur's books, but it could be hypothesised that some threads of his character have been recycled to strengthen the personality of Erlendur. This is further emphasised in the fact that the novels contain extensive literary references.¹²

Another notable issue is that despite his tendency to be reclusive and not much given to socialise, Erlendur seems to be particularly good at reaching people and getting them to reveal information relating to the investigations. In addition he is a very open minded and liberal man, he feels strongly for those people who are at the margins of society and strongly disapproves of any prejudice. This is actually in many ways in direct opposition to the image of Erlendur, in which he is depicted as a moody and grumpy man in his early fifties. The apparent contradiction becomes even more clear when his character is compared with Sigurður Óli. Sigurður Óli has just passed thirty years of age, is well educated but not broad minded and his relationship with Erlendur is at times rather colourful. His role in the novels is of course in part to be the opposite of Erlendur.

As already discussed, Erlendur's presence in the series becomes more prominent with each novel. The exceptions to this are *Outrage* and *Black Skies*, where Elínborg and Sigurður Óli are in the main roles, respectively, while Erlendur is absent. Both Elínborg and Sigurður Óli do feature in the series from the beginning. Elínborg's interest in cooking is introduced in the second novel and in *The Draining Lake* (*Kleifarvatn* (2004))

⁹ Kristín Árnadóttir discusses police stories in her article "Hverra manna er Erlendur?" in *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 1:2003, pp. 50-56.

¹⁰ One of his novels is called *Betty* ...

¹¹ Kristín Árnadóttir, "Hverra manna er Erlendur?", p. 53.

¹² For a discussion on literary references in Arnaldur's novels: Bergljót Soffía Kristjánsdóttir, "Á kálfskinnsfrakka eða Arnaldur Indriðason og bókmenntahefðin", in *Skírnir* autumn 2010, pp. 434-454.

she publishes her first cookbook. In addition, her family life is discussed in *Outrage*. She is happily married but is having troubles with her teenage son who has started to discuss sensitive personal family issues on the internet. Sigurður Óli is at first single and seems to have a tendency to drink too much but this all gets straightened out when he meets with Bergþóra, the main witness in *Silent Kill*. They move in together but when they fail to have a child she decides she wants to adopt. Sigurður Óli, however, is not so sure and eventually they separate. In *Black Skies*, Sigurður Óli is very much alone and seems to be having problems finding firm ground. His youth was briefly referred to in *Arctic Chill* but it is not until *Black Skies* that the reader gets to find out more about his family, and meet with his ambitious mother who is rich accountant and his father, a modest craftsman, who has just been diagnosed with prostate cancer. The parents are long since divorced and their relationship is in many ways similar to that of Erlendur's with his former wife. This makes Sigurður Óli's lack of patience towards Erlendur somewhat more understandable. Right from the first book, Erlendur's interest in missing persons is apparent. It is almost as if he feels partly bound by duty to investigate them, especially as he suspects that behind many missing person cases there lies a murder. In *Silent Kill* he discusses a murder case with Evu Lind, but the case comes to nothing and is eventually signed off as a missing person case:

[...] það var svo sem enginn sem kippti sér upp við það þótt þessi maður kæmi ekki í leitirnar. Íslendingar hafa einkennilegt viðhorf til mannhvarfa. Þeir hafa einhvern veginn vanist þeim í gegnum aldirnar þegar menn voru að týnast í vondum veðrum og svo fundust skinin beinin eftir hundrað ár og hvarfið varð að enn einni skemmtilegri draugasögu. Meira að segja Geirfinnsmálið hefur ekki breytt því að neinu ráði. Við kippum okkur ekki mikið upp við mannhvorf nema í undantekingartilvikum. Þau eru partur af íslenskum þjóðsögum.¹³

[...] nobody seemed bothered by the fact that this man was never found. Icelanders have a strange attitude to missing persons. They have somehow become used to such events throughout the centuries, since many people have been lost in bad weather and their bones and skin found after a hundred years or so. Such disappearances have often turned into one of many fun ghost stories. Even the Geirfinnur case has not changed this to any real extent. With few exceptions, Icelanders do not make a great deal of fuss over missing persons. They are a part Icelandic folklore.

Of course Erlendur is often proven right, since missing persons cases are often related to crimes, as seen in the first book where a missing person is one of the keys to the solution of the case. From *Silence of the Grave* the missing persons cases take up more space in the narrative and it is also revealed that Erlendur's interest in such cases is personal. In the stories that follow, the cases seem to be more and more related to his personal trauma, and this serves to underline the deep effect his brother's disappearance has had on him. In *Voices*, the murder victim is a former choirboy and a child star who was never able to get his bearings as an adult. In a sense, he 'froze' as a child, and this fact, in addition to the

¹³ Arnaldur Indriðason, *Dauðarósir*, Reykjavík, Vaka-Helgafell 1998, p. 174. Transl. úd.

cold that permeates Erlendur's hotel room (the heater is broken), brings Erlendur to think about his brother and even dream about him. The dream is so vivid that Erlendur actually wonders if he saw a ghost. Even though the supernatural is generally absent from the stories and Erlendur himself is quite adverse to any such talk, as is discussed in *Hypothermia*, the mystical does makes various appearances in the novels. The frequency of this phenomenon increases towards the end of the series. There are mediums and messages from the 'beyond' and in this way Arnaldur manages to have his cake and eat it. He indicates the possibility of the existence of ghosts while never confirming anything of the kind, until this game reaches a certain peak in Erlendur's dreams in *Strange Shores*. In this novel, his dreams could almost be described as a haunting.

In *The Draining Lake*, the memory of his missing brother haunts Erlendur, as the case and its investigation centres largely around missing persons, and in *Arctic Cold*, where the murdered boy is half-Thai, Erlendur is again reminded of his lost brother. In *Hypothermia*, the reader realises that this cannot continue, especially after a medium whom Erlendur is interrogating indicates that he sees something 'around' Erlendur. In *Silence of the Grave*, Erlendur accidentally meets with a medium when visiting his daughter at the hospital. She grabs his hand and asks him to wait, saying: "There is a little boy in the blizzard". Erlendur does not take this well and then the woman adds: "You have nothing to fear [...] He accepts it. He's reconciled to what happened. It was nobody's fault."¹⁴ In this way a certain chain of events has been set in motion early in the series. In *Hypothermia*, the main case concerns the line separating life and death. Ghosts of the past haunt a woman who then seems to hang herself in her summerhouse in Þingvellir. As a young man her husband took part in an experiment to kill a man by cooling him down to the point where his heart stopped, before attempting to revive him. As well as investigating the case of the apparent suicide, Erlendur starts working on two old missing persons cases and eventually solves both of them. However, the theme of the book is less concerned with crimes than the loss and sorrow of the friends and family of the missing and the dead.

At the end of *Hypothermia*, Erlendur leaves for the east part of the country, disappearing "into the cold fog"¹⁵, and this thread is then continued in *Strange Shores* where Erlendur spends the whole novel in his former home country. Here he is living in the ruins of his old homestead, yet again seeking any signs of his brother's remains. At the same time, almost as a coincidence, he starts to study an old story about a missing person, leading to a dramatic conclusion, not unlike that of the *Silence of the Grave*. In this way *Strange Shores* marks a climax in the story of the vanished brother. Erlendur is continually recalling memories from his childhood and the feelings of guilt that have formed a thread throughout the books become even stronger. It is this guilt that has played a big part in forming Erlendur's personality and made him into this contradictory figure. He blames himself for the disappearance of his brother and later the addictions and spoiled lives of his children. As well as being the final chapter in the search for his brother and in

¹⁴ Arnaldur Indriðason, *Silence of the Grave*, transl. Bernard Scudder, London, Vintage 2006 (2001/2005), p. 171.

¹⁵ Arnaldur Indriðason, *Hypothermia*, transl. Victoria Cribb, London, Vintage 2010 (2007/2009), p. 314.

Erlendur's own self-accusations, it is indicated that through finally finding the remains of his brother he is able to solve his own 'case'.

This added emphasis on the loss of his brother is aligned with the changes in Erlendur's character. In the first two books, and even the subsequent two, he is quite grumpy and easily angered but as the series moves on his temper seems to cool and the emphasis is rather placed on analysing and understanding what has moulded his remarkable character.

Crimes?

"This is not an American movie" ("Þetta er ekki amerísk bíómynd") Erlendur says to Sigurður Óli in *Arctic Chill*.¹⁶ They are discussing a missing person, a woman, and Sigurður Óli wonders if she had life insurance. As already discussed missing persons cases are close to Erlendur's heart, as well as gaining little attention from the police: "It was his theory that this disinterest made it easy for criminals to conceal a murder." ("Það var kenning hans að í skjóli þessa skeytingaleysis væri hægur vandi að fremja glæp.")¹⁷ A missing person is one of the cases investigated in the novel, but the main focus is on the murder of the half-Thai boy. This unavoidably involves a review of the so-called multi-cultural society in Reykjavík, the social status of immigrants and attitudes toward them. The setting is Breiðholt, a suburb of Reykjavík most densely inhabited by people with a foreign background. This discussion about the cohabitation of immigrants and non-immigrants is, however, in no way similar to that seen in American films, and Erlendur's words apply equally to both groups. Indeed this is not the first nor the last time that he makes similar announcements. This theme is contrasted with descriptions of the cold reality of Icelandic crimes, described as accidents or as simply a poorly organised mess. The role of the crime plot thus does not particularly seem to be to illuminate the ingeniousness of the investigators, nor to give the reader an insight into the world of glamorous gangsters. The emphasis is rather on the social context and in particular the social problems revealed by the crimes, and of which the crimes are a part. This does not mean that the form of the crime novel is used to mount an organised attack on various big issues, i.e. political corruption, drugs, prostitution, sexual violence, etc., rather that Arnaldur's method is to deliver the criticism in small doses, through everyday events during the investigation.¹⁸

This emphasis on social ills is closely related to Nordic crime novels in general. Nordic crime novels often focus on social issues and in the past years have, within literature, served to analyse social problems and criticise the downside of society and government. When reading British and American reviews of the Nordic crime novel it comes to light that there exists another contradiction driving the Nordic crime novel (or perhaps, the recent interest in the Nordic crime novel), since for many people the Nordic countries are the promised lands in terms of social welfare.¹⁹ The Nordic welfare state is a phrase that

¹⁶ Arnaldur Indriðason, *Vetrarborgin*, Reykjavík, Vaka-Helgafell 2006 (2005), bls. 141.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 87.

¹⁸ Kristín Árnadóttir emphasises this in her article "Hverra manna er Erlendur?".

¹⁹ See for an example a review of Nordic Crime fiction, "Inspector Norse; Scandinavian Crime Fiction" in *The Economist*, March 13, 2010, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=2&did=1983605721&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1311242981&clientId=194636>. See also Julia Keller, "Nordic Noir: Bleak Scandinavian Mysteries Catch Fire", *The Ottawa Citizen*, January 31, 2010,

we inhabitants of the north perhaps hear too often to actually truly consider what it means. This type of society is not a given at all, it is not found in many places (not even all that much in the Nordic countries, according to some) but is by many seen as the model for a good, functioning and healthy society. For this reason, people outside the Nordic countries are fascinated to read about how crimes also thrive within the Nordic welfare states, and that these organised and functional Nordic societies are dealing with the same problems as many other societies. In other words, we are besieged by the same social ills as many other nations.

Social polemics was the avowed aim of Sjöwall and Wahlöö when they started writing their famous crime novels in 1965. They were Marxists and intended to use the crime novel to pierce the ills of Swedish society. In many ways they paved the way for the wave of Nordic crime novels that followed. Kristín Árnadóttir emphasises how this Swedish couple influenced Icelandic crime fiction, as does Katrín Jakobsdóttir in her study on the history and development of Icelandic crime fiction.²⁰

To a certain extent it can be claimed that the everyday is an issue in Arnaldur's works, no less than the crimes themselves about which he writes. The everyday appears in descriptions of the police work in Arnaldur's writings, and in this way Arnaldur's stories are a good example of how the Nordic crime novel is characterised by the return of old fashioned police work, demanding boring, repetitive and often pointless activity. This is in direct opposition to the increased emphasis on clever, swift and precise technical and forensic forms of investigation so prevalent in American crime fiction.²¹

This adds to the reality effect of Nordic crime fiction and plays a vital role in slowing down the narrative. This measured style is also found in the language used, which is free of all glamour. This is apparent in Arnaldur's work but in her article, "Á kálfskinnsfrakka eða Arnaldur Indriðason og bókmenntahefðin" ("In a Calf-skin Coat or Arnaldur Indriðason and the Literary Tradition"), Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir points out how prejudice against the crime novel in Iceland appears in a criticism of Arnaldur's style of writing, which has been deemed bad, dry and flat. Bergljót does not agree with this at all and the text examples above should be a good indication of how Arnaldur chisels his style deliberately to create an atmosphere that suits the story. The style is in many ways a reflection of Erlendur's own style of talking. An example of that can be found in a description early in *Strange Shores* where Erlendur has joined a fox-hunter whom he met with previously in the novel. The hunter is very talkative and tells Erlendur long stories. Erlendur "did not know if the farmer was thinking aloud and decided to keep quiet."

<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=1953293581&SrchMode=1&sid=3&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1311243147&clientId=194636> and Laura Miller,

"Mysteries: The Strange Case of the Nordic Detectives - The Growing appeal of Scandinavian Crime Fiction; Existential Malaise and Bad Coffee", *Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2010,

<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=1940790931&SrchMode=1&sid=4&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1311243366&clientId=194636>.

²⁰ Kristín Árnadóttir, "Hverra manna er Erlendur?", Katrín Jakobsdóttir, *Glæpurinn sem ekki fannst: Saga og þróun íslenskra glæpasagna*, Reykjavík, Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, Háskólaútgáfan 2001, pp. 88-89.

²¹ This is another theme emphasised by English speaking critics, see in particular Laura Miller, "The Strange Case of the Nordic Detectives".

(“vissi ekki hvort bóndinn var að hugsa upphátt og ákvað að þegja.”)²² As a general rule Erlendur chooses to be silent rather than to say something back to the fox-hunter and the same applies to the writing style of the novels.

This refined presentation is still being formed in the first two books and *Silent Kill* contains some long monologues against the fishing quota system which is thoroughly criticised in the novel. The fishing-quota system is one of the few large political issues that is denounced in Arnaldur's work, appearing again in *Bettý*. In *Jar City* the style has become more polished and the social polemic is worked into the narrative in a more subtle way. A good example of this disciplined style is *Arctic Chill*, where discussion, information and reflections on the social status of immigrants in Iceland is smoothly introduced in small doses evenly spread throughout the narrative.

Many of the issues at stake in the novels relate to drugs and addiction and often this is somehow associated with Erlendur's children. Sexual abuse and other types of violence are regular themes, appearing in *Sons of Dust*, *Voices* and *Black Skies* to name the most striking examples. Rape is the main subject of *Outrage* and also plays an important part in *Jar City*. This, however, was played down in the film adaptation.²³ Domestic violence is the main subject in *Silence of the Grave* and issues relating to class distinctions and prejudice are a regular theme, starting in *Sons of Dust* where the school system is criticised for segregation. The so called ‘boom years’ are not an important part of the novels, even though the ‘greedism’ characterising the first seven years of the century is described in a disparaging tone. It is not until 2009, a year after the Icelandic economy crashed and burned, that Arnaldur dedicated a whole novel, *Black Skies*, to the economic expansion and the dodgy business ethics associated with it.

Yet another large theme is the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War. Corruption and conspiracy related to the Second World War is the subject of *Operation Napoleon* and *Codus Regius* is about the aftermath of the Second World War. Neither of those belongs to the Erlendur series, as has already been noted. Spies and the Cold War appear in *The Draining Lake*, where two voices tell the story, one from the past, another from the present. This narrative trick was also used in *Silence of the Grave*, and the plot there is also related to the war years.²⁴

The central consciousness is mainly Erlendur's and the social polemic most often originates with him. As already noted, Erlendur is remarkably free of prejudice and even though he finds it difficult to relate to the people closest to him, he seems to find it easy to empathise with social outcasts and this makes him a fitting representative of the perceptive criticism so prevalent in Arnaldur's books. The novels thus tackle many issues and they can in fact just as well be described from the point of view of these social ills, leaving the crimes aside.

Ice and Country

²² Arnaldur Indriðason, *Furðustrandir*, Reykjavík, Vaka-Helgafell 2010, bls. 12.

²³ Björn Ægir Norðfjörð discusses this in his article “‘A Typical Icelandic Murder?’ A ‘Criminal’ Adaptation of *Jar City*”, *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, 1:2011, pp. 37-49.

²⁴ The victims' voices are sometimes heard in some of the books, such as in *Voices* and *Hypothermia*. They serve the purpose of creating an atmosphere and tighten the characterisation, even to underline Erlendur's closeness to their lives.

The chilly everyday reality that surrounds the crimes in Arnaldur's work is inseparable from the chilly setting of the stories. Erlendur prefers the cold and darkness of the winter, and disappears into the white fog at the end of the book *Hypothermia*:

Erlendur stood by the derelict farm that had once been his home, looking up at Mount Harðskafi. It was difficult to see the mountain because of the icy fog that was sinking ever lower over the fjord. [...] After gazing at the mountain for a long time in solemn silence, he set off on foot, with a walking stick in his hand and a small pack on his back. He made quick progress, enfolded in the hush of nature now fallen into its winter sleep. Before long he had disappeared into the cold fog.²⁵

When winter ends, the white and blinding summer light besieges Erlendur and causes him troubles: "The damn midnight sun kept him away long into the night. It seemed impossible to close it out. Erlendur tried to isolate his bedroom from the light nights with heavy curtains but still the sun managed to slip in" ("Helvítis miðnætursólin hélt fyrir honum vöku langt frameftir öllu. Það var eins og ekkert dygði á hana. Erlendur reyndi að útiloka svefnherbergi sitt frá næturbirtunni með þykkum gluggatjöldum en henni tókst að smjúga framhjá þeim.").²⁶ Eventually he asks Elínborg to help him find something he can cover his eyes with and this makes her laugh: "You mean like old ladies wear in films?" she asked, enjoying Erlendur's acute embarrassment" ("Meinarðu eins og kellingarnar eru með í bíómyndum? spurði hún og naut þess að sjá Erlend engjast fyrir framan sig.")²⁷ In this way Arnaldur plays with the two opposites of the Icelandic weather and seasons and condenses them into one, although the searing light is clearly a more fearful enemy to Erlendur than the cold fog. Again it must be pointed out that this surrounding of white desolation is not only a striking feature of Arnaldur's work but is also a characteristic of many Nordic crime novels. They thrive in many ways on this image of the north as a world of darkness, cold and desolation.²⁸ In addition to this, the desolate country also carries ideas of purity, all of this endless white space creates a feeling of peacefulness and innocence. The contradiction involved is used by authors of Nordic crime fiction, in the midst of this peacefulness there are signs of violence, of bloody corpses. This allows the authors to play on these two opposites, the darkness, cold and desolation with its undertones of cruelty, lawlessness and loneliness, and the idea of the purity of the white and the untouched being broken by criminal activity.

Arnaldur adds to this in his main character, Erlendur, associating the crimes with cold and desolation with continual references to his past and the disappearance of his brother. As already pointed out, Erlendur is a friend of winter, almost a kind of Groke; at times it seems that everything gets colder around him. This setting is continually emphasised, such as in the chilly surroundings of *Sons of Dust*, the continual autumn rain in *Jar City*, the cold hotel room in *Voices*, the winter storm that breaks out as the solution to *Arctic*

²⁵ Arnaldur Indriðason, *Hypothermia*, p. 314.

²⁶ Arnaldur Indriðason, *Dauðarósir*, bls. 13. Transl. úd.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ English speaking critics emphasise this as is apparent from the articles mentioned above (footnote 19).

Chill is in sight, the lethal cold of the waters in *Hypothermia* and the increasing cold in *Strange Shores*. Even though *Hypothermia* actually takes place in the late summer, the novel is focused on the cold, both in the plot itself, and in the coldness that can reside in the human soul. The same applies to *The Draining Lake*.

These characteristics can be related to the style itself, already described as terse and free of decorative frills. Let's have a look at these sentences from *Strange Shores*:

Hann stóð hjá Urðarkletti og sá refaskyttuna nálgast hægum skrefum. Þeir heilsuðust kurteislega í súldinni. Orð þeirra rufu kyrrðina eins og þau kæmu úr annarlegum heimi.

Það hafði ekki sést til sólar í nokkra daga. Þoka lá yfir fjörðunum og spáð var kólnandi og snjókomu á næstu dögum. Náttúran var lögst í vetrardvala.²⁹

He stood by Urðarklettur (the rock of the witch) and saw the fox-hunter coming slowly closer. They greeted each other politely in the drizzle. Their words broke the silence as if they came from another world.

The sun had not been seen for a few days. A fog lay over the fjords and the forecast was for snow and more cold. Nature had gone into winterhibernation.

Each word serves a purpose - Urðarklettur, slow steps, the drizzle, the silence, another world, sun out of sight, fog, cold, snow, winterhibernation (hæg skref, súldin, kyrrðin, annarlegur heimur, ekki sést til sólar, þoka, kólnandi, snjókoma, vetrardvali) – all to create the tight, enclosed atmosphere of a bleak wasteland. One of the sentences contains a similitude - “Orð þeirra rufu kyrrðina [...] annarlegum heimi”/ “Their words broke the silence as if they came from another world” – however, the image is straightforward and underlines the atmosphere even more. This is a world of silence, a world that is in some way beyond everyday reality. The title of the book is after all *Strange Shores*, and ultimately Erlendur disappears into another world, a world of past and old pain, a world that lives within him. Also it contains the strongest indication of a haunting in addition to possibly the most horrifying murder. There are many indications that *Strange Shores* is the final story about Erlendur and it ends with him disappearing into the mountains in the good old Icelandic tradition.

It seems that for readers outside the Nordic countries, such a setting provides an insight into an unknown world, but for us who live with this continual cold these are familiar surroundings which take on a fresh appearance as a setting for the events which unfold in the stories.

Another issue that makes Nordic crime fiction so fascinating is the usage of isolated locations, often on the edges of civilisation, hardly even inhabitable. It is interesting to be given an insight into the world of the small village, partly due to the fact that the closeness makes all investigations a highly complicated affair. Everybody has way too much knowledge about everyone else and they measure it out as they seem fit. This is another version of the classic crime fiction trick that everybody knows more than they know they know. This is used to considerable extent in *Silent Kill*, *Jar City* and *Outrage* and also appears in *Silence of the Grave*. In fact all novels contain another important

²⁹ Arnaldur Indriðason, *Furðustrandir*, bls. 9.

element of this enclosed setting, that is how the struggles found in a secluded area can be reflected into a wider context.³⁰ In this way the cases that the policemen are involved in are not bound to the location, but are a part of a wider context of international social ills (e.g. addiction and rape), as is perhaps most clearly seen in *Silence of the Grave* where the representatives of the American army immediately recognise the symptoms of the domestic violence experienced by the woman who is one of the main characters in the novel.

Iceland is of course the perfect 'microsociety', separated into even smaller 'microsocieties', scattered and isolated. Arnaldur has used this in many ways but never to a greater extent than he does in *Strange Shores*. Here Erlendur has returned to where he spent his childhood, still preoccupied by his brother's disappearance but at the same time immersed in an investigation of yet another missing person case from this part of the country, where a woman died from exposure after being trapped in a blizzard many years before. Her body was never found and as before, Erlendur is keen to find some kind of closure for the family, or perhaps mostly for himself. He lives in his old house, now abandoned and derelict.³¹

Arnaldur allows himself to take some highly suitable mystic undertones a step further and catches many nuances of this isolated and scattered setting. He uses the setting well, for example, by providing a feeling for distances (Erlendur is always driving in a jeep between towns, villages and graveyards, indeed all around the area), in addition to describing the surroundings, people, past society and the society of the present. Finally a fuller image is given of Erlendur's own childhood, his parents and the lost brother.

"You were bad news"

says Erlendur's former wife to him when they meet at Eva Lind's insistence.³² She is still bitter after having lost what she thought was the perfect bourgeois life with husband and child. In Icelandic literary discussion this idea has at times reared its head, that the crime fiction wave mainly powered by Arnaldur is an ugly sending into the white and pure Icelandic literary landscape, richly populated by belles lettres. Such an attitude does not only show a lack of knowledge about the form of crime fiction in general, and prejudice against it, but is also guilty of belittling the important role served by crime fiction, such as offering a much needed social criticism. The popularity of crime fiction which often serves to condemn them further, can also be read into a wider context. Arnaldur is at the moment not only Iceland's most popular writer, but also probably the best known Icelandic writer abroad. It should be clear that the popularity of his novels abroad has played an important role in introducing Icelandic literature to the wider world outside Iceland, and creating an interest in it. In light of this it can be safely claimed that contrary to being an ugly sending, Arnaldur's books are a welcome addition to the flora of

³⁰ In the article "Nordic Writers Find That Crime Pays" this issue is discussed, appearing in *The Sunday Independent*, published in Johannesburg January 31, 2010, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=1954595121&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1311246906&clientId=194636>.

³¹ When I read the book I sometimes suspected that Arnaldur was having fun fulfilling the image his books have in German (and other) translations, where a derelict or isolated farmhouse is often pictured on the covers. Until *Strange Shores* none of the stories take place in the countryside, apart from short scenes.

³² Arnaldur Indriðason, *Hypothermia*, p. 136.

Icelandic literature, both at home and abroad. Furthermore, even though Erlendur disappears for good at the end of *Strange Shores*, Arnaldur Indriðason's role in the history of Icelandic literature is far from over.

úlfhildur dagsdóttir