

Sjón in Morgenbladet by Rob Young

The chauffeur picking me up from Keflavik airport is so despondent, he might be more of a ferryman of doom than a taxi driver. The forty five minute drive is one stream of complaint and worry. Hekla, active volcano whose ash clouds grounded half the world's aviation industry, is reported to be boiling up again. Prices and interest rates have increased while salaries have dropped. Immigration is changing the country. The last four summers have been terrible, and there's a storm predicted to hit Reykjavik tonight.

Iceland has gone through an economic boom and bust since I last visited in 1999, and it seems like there's never a dull moment. Iceland may be far away from the rest of the world and exist in its own unique timezone, but every moment seems to be lived on the edge of catastrophe.

But I'm not here to quiz taxi drivers on the state of the world. Instead I've come to meet the man who's probably the most internationally famed Icelandic author of the moment. A poet and novelist, writer of opera librettos, song lyrics with Björk, and a former punk rock performer, he publishes his literary work under the name 'Sjón' (Icelandic for 'vision'). Born as Sigurjón Birgir Sigurðsson in 1962, Sjón has published 12 books of poems and 12 novels.

But the author has never been so much in demand as he is now. In Iceland a trilogy of novels begun when he was a teenager, *Codex 1962*, will finally be published for the first time later this month, alongside a conference to launch an 500 page academic study of his work. His most recent book, *Moonstone – The Boy Who Never Was*, represents a critical breakthrough in the English-speaking world, and has sent him touring the US. It will also appear on the Norwegian imprint Orkana, translated by Silje Beite Løken, in March 2017.

In addition, Sjón, it can be revealed today, has just been selected as the next author in the Future Library project,. This ongoing literary time capsule, launched in 2014, is an ambitious art project by Scottish artist Katie Paterson, based at Oslo's Deichmanske hovedbibliotek.. 100 authors, one year at a time, will deliver an unread text to a special storage chamber at the library, and at the same time plant a tree in a specially designated area of the Marka near Frognerstet. The manuscripts will remain a secret until 2114, when they will be revealed and made into a book printed on paper pulped from the patch of forest.

Sjón follows Margaret Atwood and David Mitchell to become the first Nordic author in the series, as well as the first whose written language is not English.

I meet him just a few weeks after he accepted the commission, and he seems delighted to have been asked. 'I've put aside weeks in December and January where I will work directly on it, but I've already of course started thinking about it. The question is, when you write normally, do you take into account that you want the work to survive through the ages, or do you simply hope that by writing sincerely and precisely about your own times, that will give the work the quality that will survive? So this project really asks you to take a stance, you know? It automatically asks you to think about death [laughs] and things that survive... and hope... it brings with it all those grand concepts.'

It also confidently assumes the continued existence of the book, at a time when it seems under threat.

'For me it's always been more a question of embracing the fact that storytelling and grand narratives – poetry in all its forms, and theatre – existed long before the book.'

The book is a relatively new object, a means of distribution of stories. Even though we love it and cherish it very much, who's to say that in the next 100 years we will not see the birth of a new form of distribution for stories, that will then also mould the way stories are told and presented?'

His latest work before the Future Library, *Moonstone*, like all of Sjón's novels is relatively short, but packs in a great deal of interlocking material. Covering a few weeks in Reykjavik in November 1918, plus a coda ten years later, it weaves together the story of a teenage male prostitute, a mysterious leather-clad female motorcyclist, a devastating volcanic eruption, the history of silent film in Iceland, a deadly outbreak of Spanish influenza, and a secret history of Nordic influence in the British art world. In common with Sjón's other fiction, it deals with shame and exile, with thirst for knowledge of the outside world, and with the power of the moral majority in remote regions and tight societies.

'Iceland is a small population, it's a remote place,' he acknowledges, as we settle into the shabby sofas of a café near the harbour. 'I think in my books, that is just there – that is a fact. So let's not make a big deal out of that, it's just how it is. I'm much more interested in the lives people manage to live in places like that. Of course it is informed by hardship, and shortage and in many cases unforgiving social rules or attitudes. But at the same time, people are trying to live complex, rewarding lives here.

'And that is maybe the difference between Iceland and Norway – we are not directly attached to any bigger entities, you know. We are here on this island in the north of the Atlantic, so our relationship with the world automatically becomes dynamic, because things leave and things come back.

'Sometimes it's difficult to leave, sometimes you are trapped here, sometimes you are expelled from here... sometimes you are welcomed, sometimes you are punished for coming here. This is the dynamics of an island society. This is really something I think I've touched with all of my books: this relationship of the remote place with the rest of the world.'

While it's mainly rooted in Iceland's landscape and culture, Sjón's fiction spans a wide and diverse range of time zones and characters, and often the solid ground of fact crumbles into the dream-scape of mythology. *The Blue Fox* (*Skugga-Baldur*, 2003), which opens in a fluid and tense series of short poetic fragments describing a hunter pursuing a magical animal through an avalanche, becomes an investigation of Iceland's cruel late 19th century treatment of Downs syndrome children.

The historical novel *From the Mouth of the Whale* (*Rökkurbysnir*, 2008) is partly based on the real-life polymath Jón Guðmundsson the Learned, who lived in the early 1600s. A poet, healer and self-educated follower of Paracelsus is banished to a remote island by a society hardening into Lutheranism. The structure of the natural world is revealed to him in a series of lyrical visions, but he also witnesses the barbaric murders of Basque fishermen who quarrel with local traders, and the deaths of his own family.

Common to all these stories is a narrative of a small and faraway culture infiltrated with ideas, personalities and belief systems from the wider world.

'I think it has become quite obvious that the reason the Sagas were written here and not in Norway or Sweden or Denmark is because this was the only place where you had two cultures coming together: the Celtic culture of the British islands, and the Nordic culture. So you had the Nordic, Germanic tradition and heritage of the epic poems, of storytelling, and you had the Celtic knowledge of putting those things

together and putting them into manuscripts,' says Sjón.

'That is why it happened here and not those other places: here it was a multicultural society. You had the Catholic Celts and the heathen Nordics coming together. The high point of Icelandic literature in the 17th century is the religious poet Hallgrímur Pétursson, who was influenced by the Baroque. The great national poets of the 19th century embraced Romanticism. Then in the early 20th century we had Halldór Laxness, first embracing surrealism, then communism, then taoism... and then Icelandic poetry was renewed after the second world war with the modernists. So, actually the culture is always about direct interaction.'

Your fiction often describes hostility to outsiders, transgressions and difference... is that an element you still feel in the air here now?

'This part of my novels is always about contemporary Iceland,' he admits.

'It's a reminder of the fact that this is a tendency in our society, and we should always be aware of it, and wary of it. So it's definitely speaking to our times. We did not become the secure, tolerant society we are today without a struggle. It is not because Icelanders are genetically kind and good people that we have become more or less civilised and kind to each other. It's because we actually had to be taught [laughs], and pushed in that direction.

'And you see that in *The Blue Fox*: it's the Icelander who comes from abroad who brings with him the idea of showing the woman with Downs syndrome charity and decides to take care of her. While the homegrown man of God refuses her... He represents that tendency in society. And in *Moonstone* you have the same thing – the good people of Reykjavik are definitely not tolerant of this aberration, this queer kid.'

Nature plays a strong part in Sjón's writing. But, he confesses, although he writes in a small fisherman's cottage on the south coast, he doesn't spend much time out in the fresh air.

'I spent a lot of time in nature as a child. But I'm very much a product of Reykjavik, and as a grown-up I have not become a nature person – I don't go on hikes.'

He grew up, he says, on the outskirts of the city, in a socially mixed environment.

'You had this reality of living in a landscape of concrete and blocks being built and all the dangers of playing there, all the social problems... But we just ran over the street and we were in nature. We walked out into the fields and we could go and find ducks' nests, or down to the river and see the salmon jump... we went up to this little hill and witnessed the arrival of the ring plover in the spring, the harbinger of spring in Iceland. So we had those two realities, and I think this has really informed the way I write – nature has this mystical, mythical quality. Because I acknowledge it is a force that does not belong to us, and if we go there, it's at our own peril.'

He's also conscious of the potential extinction of languages spoken by small populations.

'The Icelandic language is undergoing changes now, and is for the first time faced with the possibility of receding as a literary language. More and more young authors are choosing to write in English. When Google was developing software a few years ago, I think Icelandic was like number 137 on the list of importance when it came to languages. And it was only due to the fact that an Icelander was working on that project that Icelandic became a part of that software from the beginning.

'Of course we are building on a centuries-long tradition of writing in this language, and our main literary corpus is from the 13th century. So in a way I should not be worried. I am absolutely sure that for each writer who is asked to contribute to the Library, the project will bring questions to all of us.'

As an intellectually curious teenager, Sjón's biggest influence was modernist poetry, art rock and surrealism. After hearing the *Diamond Dogs* LP in 1974 he became obsessed with David Bowie and his multiple personae. He also noted that in the model Amanda Lear, Bowie had a mutual friend with Salvador Dalí. In the late 70s he formed a small surrealist group with schoolfriends in Reykjavik called Medúsa, who explored 'the poetry and all the different games and literary techniques they had to offer... those blended in with the anarchism we picked up from punk. We started publishing books, organising meetings, and then in 1981 the new music explosion happened here, and we became part of that.' Medúsa members read their poetry at rock gigs and made industrial electronic music. It was during this time that Sjón met Björk, who was singing with several different short lived post-punk groups, just before the formation of the Sugarcubes. He later provided lyrics for several of her solo albums, including the lyrics used on Lars von Trier's film *Dancer in the Dark*. Their last collaboration was on her *Biophilia* album (2011), but he doesn't rule out more work in future: 'Obviously it's easy for us to work together because we've known each other since we were teenagers, and we just open the doors to the old surrealist laboratory and go in there. We have all those wonderful tools and shared references that we can work with.'

His musical connections remain strong. *NEOARCTIC*, a multimedia oratorio about climate change and the Anthropocene composed by Latvia's Kristis Auznieks, with a libretto by Sjón, premiered in Riga and Copenhagen this summer.

'In general I really enjoy working with musicians because having your words sung and produced by the amazing voices, it's like a wonderful present for the wordsmith.'

In *From the Mouth of the Whale*, Sjón quotes the Saga author Snorri Sturluson, encouraging poets to maintain an internal logic when using metaphors, otherwise the results will be 'monstrous'. The novel's protagonist, by contrast, insists that 'the twilight portents have toppled the world from its foundations' and therefore 'let the sword turn into an adder and the adder a salmon and the salmon a birch twig and birch twig a sword and the sword a tongue... Let it all run together so swiftly that it cannot be separated again...' Surely this insertion of surrealist technique into a 17th century setting is intended as some kind of manifesto by the author?

'Yes, it's true,' he replies. 'Because Snorri presents the classical form where things are correct and adhered to fixed aesthetics, while the character, you're right, speaking a bit on my behalf there, asks for a much more rebellious approach. So he's practically asking for what happened in the 20th century when the dadaists and surrealists freed the metaphor from logic.'

His youthful experiments led the 21 year old Sjón, through a long chain of correspondence via Icelandic artist Alfreð Flóki and London's Melmoth group, to meetings with international surrealists, and an introduction to Elisabeth Breton, widow of surrealist founder Andre Breton. 'I took the bus to the south of France and knocked on her door and she invited me in for a drink, and we talked a bit and then she just invited me to stay. So I stayed with her for five or six days in this wonderful little 13th century house in a tiny village by the River Lot. That was of course a big experience for me, just to be able to sit with her and chat, and then get so close. She just started sharing all sorts of things with me. Telling me stories about different things in the house, and how many of the greatest poets and artists of the century had also been the guests of the house...

'It became a fantastic and life forming experience for me. I was baptised to surrealism in the River Lot!'

What can we expect from Sjón once he has delivered his text to the Future Library in

Oslo next spring?

'One of the elements I would like to explore in my novel writing now is the more realist or naturalistic approach. That is something I've been completely against for decades, so that will at least be a part of the next challenge I will set myself. Try to find my way in that new landscape.

'I have actually become a much more socially engaged author than I thought I would be, and I'm dealing much more with those moral issues than I thought I would be. I started in a quite aggressive avant garde mindset, and wanted to create havoc through my texts, or shock people. But then I started moving more and more in this direction.

'Like many Nordic authors, I took a stance against the socially engaged novel of the 70s, where novels became documents for a political cause. So when I started drifting in this direction, which became most obvious in *The Blue Fox*, and ever since, I had to find a way of balancing this and just make it come through the story instead of any direct finger-pointing.'

It may be more realism he is aiming for, but we can be sure it will not be a reality recognisable to everybody.

'Every novel,' he concludes, 'should be a rediscovery of what the novel can be. So when I read novels by other authors, in a way I can only take it seriously if I sense that on some level the author has engaged with the question: what is the novel made of? What can it be? And *this*, is my proposal for the perfect novel.'