

Sjón is Future Library's next recruit to become a 22nd-century author

The Icelandic writer joins Margaret Atwood and David Mitchell in creating a work to be locked away in Norway until 2114, as part of Katie Paterson's art installation



The challenge has 'game-like qualities' ... Iceland's Sjón. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

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The acclaimed Icelandic author Sjón has been named as the third of 100 writers who will contribute to artist Katie Paterson's Future Library, an artwork spanning 100 years which will see each manuscript locked away unseen until 2114, when the collection of 100 texts is finally revealed.

Margaret Atwood was Future Library's first contributor, handing over her piece of writing, *Scribbler Moon*, to Paterson in 2015. David Mitchell followed up this spring with *From Me Flows What You Call Time*. Both authors passed on their manuscripts in the middle of Oslo's Nordmarka forest, where Paterson planted 1,000 trees in 2014. In 2114, the trees will be cut down to make the paper on which the 100 manuscripts will be printed - and, finally, read.



Katie Paterson, left, and David Mitchell, centre, visit the Nordmarka forest in Norway in May 2016. Photograph: Kristin von Hirsch/Bjørvika Utvikling

Scottish artist Paterson, who herself will never read the writing she has asked the authors to contribute - the project will be kept going by a trust - called Sjón a “visionary author”. The project’s first non-English-language contributor, the Icelandic author has been translated into 35 languages, and won prizes including the Icelandic literary prize and the Nordic Council’s literature prize for novels including *Moonstone: The Boy Who Never Was* and *The Blue Fox*.

“Sjón creates a world of metamorphosis: his poetic works weave together history and myth, folklore, ancient storytelling, the surreal and the magical, through the language of past and contemporary Icelandic,” said Paterson. “His writing is dynamic and melodic, and like *Future Library*, interlaces the human and natural world through stretches of time. In addition to writing poems, novels, plays, librettos, lyrics, and children’s books, Sjón often collaborates with other artists and musicians, so I am very excited about the possibilities his contribution will bring to this hidden library growing through the trees.”

The author professed himself delighted to have been chosen as the latest contributor, having watched Atwood and Mitchell’s turns. “I sat out here green with envy and hoping my turn would come sometime in the next 50 years, before I’m 104,” he said. “There are so many beautiful things about it - the fact the forest will be growing as the writers contribute to the project. That this is an actual living thing, growing, waiting.”

The “beauty” of the *Future Library*, he told the *Guardian*, was how it “makes you confront questions” about how an author writes, and how their work is received. “Most of the time at the back of our minds when we’re writing, we’re thinking about reception, about our fears and our hopes that our works will survive through the decades and into the centuries ahead,” he said. “How much do you rely on the reception of your work? Does it matter, and how big a part is it of my way of writing? Is it all about vanity, about instant shaming or instant praise?”

The *Future Library*, Sjón believes, has “strong game-like qualities”. “It wasn’t until I was invited to contribute to it - and had gladly accepted to do so - that I started to understand the depth of its challenge. Like the best of games the *Future Library* makes the player aware of the skills and flaws he or she brings to the playing field, in this case it tests the fundamentals of everything an author must deal with when sincerely engaging with the art of

writing: Am I writer of my times? Who do I write for? How much does the response of the reader matter to me? What in a text makes it timeless? And for some of us it poses the hardest question of all: Will there be people in the future who understand the language I write in? It is a game I look forward to playing with enthusiasm and earnestness,” he said.

The author pointed out that only 330,000 people speak Icelandic, and that “there’s no guarantee that in 100 years, Icelandic as a literary language will still be around”.

“Being the first non-English writer from a language spoken by few - that’s what we call it here - for me of course I really have to face the question of language,” he said. “We will see. I feel a duty to write in that language and not English.”

He also highlighted the likely change in the concept of the book, in 98 years’ time. “We don’t have a clue where the book will be in 2114. Will there be books? Or will [the headlines] be, ‘in Norway they are producing a book like they did in the old days?’ Will it be morally wrong to destroy trees in 2114, because we have discovered that trees are emotional beings?” he asked.

A poet and librettist, as well as a novelist, Sjón has yet to decide what form his contribution will take - and even once he does, he won’t reveal it. “I’ve already started thinking about this and rolling it around in my mind. I still haven’t decided what kind of text I will write,” he said. “I don’t know if it will be a big work or a small work. Katie says it’s completely up to me if it’s a one-word piece or a novella or a single poem. That’s also part of the game. But if you do that, is it because you don’t want to risk saying more, or because it’s all you have to say? We’ll see.”



'Will it be morally wrong to destroy trees?' ... logs in the Nordmarka forest, Oslo. Photograph: Giorgia Polizzi