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The detective and the Sagas: Erlendur in the novels of Arnaldur Indriðason

ABSTRACT

Arnaldur Indriðason's Erlendur novels are popular crime fiction stories set in Iceland. Detective Erlendur Sveinsson's team deals with serious crimes, murders, and missing persons. Their cases are contemporary, but Indriðason has always said that he is influenced as a writer by the medieval Icelandic sagas. How is this illustrated by his crime fiction? The sagas, like crime fiction, contain stories of murder, revenge, love, loss and family conflicts. The paper uses examples from the novels and the sagas to examine the links between them. These links include the importance of traditional and local stories and the significance of fate. The paper also describes how Erlendur's character develops over the series until he becomes an archetypical saga hero.

KEYWORDS

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Indriðason
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THE QUESTION: THE INFLUENCE OF THE SAGAS

The great Icelandic medieval sagas were written in Old Icelandic in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but commemorate people and events from the time of the Saga Age, two hundred years earlier (Whaley 2002: ix-x; Byock 2015: 18). The Detective Erlendur Sveinsson crime fiction novels by Arnaldur Indriðason are set in Iceland and were first published, in Icelandic, between 1997 and 2014.

Critics often comment on the influence of the sagas on Indriðason's work in general terms, for instance, 'Indriðason's Iceland is one that is explicitly mediated by the literary tradition of the sagas—stories of family disputes, discord, anger, revenge, and curses' (Burke 2012: 203). Indriðason says he has been 'heavily influenced' by the sagas (Johnstone 2008). What does this mean? Elements of the sagas, with their stories of love, happiness, grief, retribution, brutality, jealousy, greed and violence, are in all good literature, and especially in good crime fiction. Are there even more links to the sagas in Indriðason's work, and how is Erlendur a saga-like hero?

ERLENDUR

Indriðason's 'consideration of crime in a peaceful place leads to deeper insight into the human condition in general' (Davis 2009: 11). He has said that he uses his characters to create tension (Crime Fiction Lover 2015). Erlendur's character develops as the books progress, and as Tulinius writes, 'Il suscite la sympathie du lecteur qui veut connaître la suite' [he evokes the sympathy of the reader who wishes to know what follows] (2010: 906).¹

Erlendur's Iceland is a 'place in which secrets and people are all too readily lost and forgotten' (Burke: 202). His obsession is with the missing and those left behind, the people living with the sorrow and the loss. 'Everyone knew that Erlendur could not stand unsolved cases on his desk, especially if they involved missing persons.' (2008: 83).

This is because he knows the grief that loss brings. His father was overwhelmed by 'total hopelessness and self-recrimination' (2007: 285) after the death of Erlendur's brother Bergur in a blizzard. As a result of this tragedy his family moved from their farm to Reykjavík when he was twelve years old. Erlendur, whose name means foreigner, became an outsider in the city, taken away from his home, the 'simple rural life and isolation' (2006: 201). His feelings of loneliness, isolation, and dislocation result from his past, but the choices he makes are understandable to readers, who sympathise with him.

Erlendur's thoughts, for instance in the dramatic cemetery scenes in Hvalsnes (2004: 323-337), make the setting and action clear to readers. 'It is through Erlendur that the reader experiences the cases and ... should experience it in the same way' (Indriðason 2001). Reykjavík, that 'glittering winter city on the northernmost shores of the world' (2008: 344) comes to life for us through Erlendur.

CRIME IN THE SAGAS AND THE NOVELS

The word saga 'means both history and story' (Byock 2001:23). The sagas are 'realistic stories about everyday issues confronting Icelandic farmers and their chieftains' (Byock 2001:23). Guðmundsson calls them 'the best Nordic crime fiction ever' (Guðmundsson 2009). The sagas used as examples here, *Egil's Saga*, *The Saga of the People of Laxárdal*, *Gísli Súrsson's Saga* and *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* all have murder and lawbreaking as common themes.

The sagas are concerned with families and conflicts, and are set in 'familiar social settings ... mixed with acts of violence and injustice' (Pálsson 1971: 14). If anyone was killed

¹ With thanks to David Foreman for the translation.

in the sagas it was for the family to take revenge or be compensated (Tulinius 2010: 895). ‘As a rule the narrative proceeds as a series of killings with its action structured by the duty to exact revenge for death or for offense inflicted on oneself, a friend, or a family member’. (Árnason 1991: 157).

Murders in the sagas happen in families, as for instance in *The Saga of the People of Laxárdal*, when one foster brother kills another, and in *Gísli Súrsson’s Saga*, where an unsolved murder compels Gísli to kill his brother-in-law. In *The Saga of the People of Laxárdal* Bolli is killed for his part in Kjartan’s murder, but Bolli’s sons take their revenge on his killer years later. Gunnlaugr’s father’s men kill several of Hrafn’s kinsmen in revenge for Gunnlaugr’s death in *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*.

Erlendur deals with ‘crime, murder, [and] violent incidents’ (Indriðason 2013: 15) in present day Reykjavík. His cases, which deal with contemporary topics like child abuse, genetics and financial greed have the same known settings and universal appeal as the stories in the sagas. He is a modern-day hero, hardworking, a good detective, compassionate, capable of great love, and a ‘trustworthy man without any pretences’ (Indriðason 2008: 334). He fights, as the saga heroes do, but in his case the battles are fought on behalf of lost and forgotten people and the victims of crimes. His investigations protect victims, and give closure to families.

The novels are also a mixture of fact and fiction. Icelandic history is often part of their background, and they often interweave old and new crime investigations: ‘A murder is a murder no matter how long ago’ (Indriðason 2006: 63). *The Draining Lake* (Indriðason 2008), for instance, blends the discovery of a skeleton with Cold War espionage.

Murders in the novels are sometimes also committed for vengeance, for instance in *The Draining Lake* (Indriðason 2008), where Tómas kills the man who betrayed him many years earlier. They often take place within families, as for instance in *Hypothermia* (Indriðason 2009), where a husband kills his wife for her money, or in *Silence of the Grave* (Indriðason 2006), where a son kills his father for beating his mother.

In *Strange Shores* (Indriðason 2013) Erlendur uncovers two murders, one originally concealed as a disappearance and one a later revenge killing. He often describes ‘disappearances as a distinctively Icelandic crime’ (Indriðason 2008: 85), suspecting that they may be suicides, or murders hidden behind deaths assumed to have been caused by Iceland’s harsh physical conditions, and ‘the moors and mountains that could exact such a cruel price for the slightest mistake’ (2014: 263). The weather is always a factor in both the novels and the sagas: there are many drownings in storms at sea in the sagas, while the rain in *Jar City* (Indriðason 2004), the intense cold in *Strange Shores* (Indriðason 2013), and the recurring

blizzard motif all add to the atmosphere of foreboding in the novels.

STYLE

The sagas and the novels are compact stories. Indriðason says that ‘the sagas... were written on rare cowskin so they had to be very concise. They don’t use two words where one will do, and I take my cue from that. If you describe things, keep it simple’ (Johnstone 2008).

Both name locations without needing to describe them. In the novels, brief details, for instance for the location of Erlendur’s father’s farm, Bakkasel (Indriðason 2008: 155; 2009: 166), are given only if necessary. Actions and dialogue, rather than descriptions, reveal characters and settings.

In *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* there is a typically short but telling description of Gunnlaugr’s father: “‘Illugi the Black lived at Gilsbakki in Hvitasida ... He was a great landowner, very strong-willed, and he stood by his friends’” (*The Sagas* 2001: 565). Egil in *Egil’s Saga* is difficult even as a child: ‘everyone was aware that they had to teach their sons to give in to him’ (*The Sagas* 2001: 62).

One of the few descriptions of Erlendur is that ‘he generally got his way. His superiors and colleagues had long since given up doing battle with him. Things had turned out that way over the years. Erlendur didn’t dislike it’ (Indriðason 2004: 37). Erlendur’s life in his tiny apartment filled with books and old photographs is shown just as briefly (Indriðason 2004: 13).

CULTURE

The novels are ‘primarily Icelandic, dealing with Icelanders, taking place in an Icelandic setting and even revolving around current issues in Icelandic society at the time’ (Indriðason 2001). Indriðason’s crime fiction creates what Burke calls ‘a particular, anti-heroic construction of Icelandic culture, but one that is steeped in the saga tradition and in a sense of the profoundly unchanging nature of Icelandic society’ (2012: 195).

Religion is one example of this link with the ‘saga tradition’. Many sagas mention the arrival of Christianity and the building of churches, and Gunnlaugr, for instance, ‘received the full rites from a priest before he died’ (Whaley 2002: 146). Erlendur is a product of his traditional country upbringing. He had ‘often read the Bible’ (Indriðason 2004: 139) and his ability to use Biblical quotations shows that Indriðason expects his readers to recognise these. Some of the saddest words in these books are quotations from the Bible or from hymns. They are often the final paragraphs, so that, as in *Voices*, the books finish on a backwards-looking, reflective note, reminding us of the story of the victim (Indriðason 2007: 344).

In another link with the sagas, in which ‘Grief and love were not allowed to be demonstrative’ (Foote 1957: xxi), and as in the old saying, where ‘Í “gamla daga” bar fólk harm sinn í hljóði’ [‘In “the old days”, people carried their grief in silence’]², Erlendur also carries ‘his guilt in silence’ (Indriðason 2013: 181).

Indriðason warns his readers that Icelanders cannot remain culturally isolated (Strahan 2013: 274, 282; Jakobsdóttir 2011: 52). “‘This is all so new to us. Immigrants, racial issues... we know so little about it,’” Erlendur said eventually.’ (2008: 86). But Erlendur is capable of change: the victim in *Arctic Chill* is a small Thai boy and it is Erlendur who says “‘Shouldn’t we say that he’s an Icelander until we find out otherwise?’” (Indriðason 2008: 4).

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITIONS AND LOCAL STORIES

During the Saga Age Iceland was a country of dispersed farmsteads, and sagas ‘entertained, preserved and shaped traditions about the past’ (Whaley 2002: x). They had a social as well as a literary function (Byock 2001: 22), because they were important for people who wanted to remember their local and family history. In a political system based on personal ties, a saga established a common history and identity for a chieftain’s followers (Kristinsson 2003: 7-8).

Sagas mention places and events known to their listeners (Whaley 2002: xliii). For instance, ‘the chief characters in *Gunnlaug’s Saga* are historical’ (Foote 1957: xii). Gunnlaugr, his rival Hrafn and his father Illugi all appear in *Landnámabók* [The Book of Settlements] (Foote 1957: xii), a medieval account of the history of Iceland.

Indriðason comments, through Erlendur’s move to Reykjavík, on the emptying of the countryside (Indriðason 2006: 37; 2013: 178) and the consequent loss of old values and traditions (Jakobsdóttir 2011: 47; Strahan 2013: 274-276; Forshaw 2012: 128). The importance of individuals being able to retain their heritage, the local ‘stories of everyday life that had been told for years and decades’ (Indriðason 2006: 201) is a major theme in his work. After the deaths of his parents, Erlendur ‘no longer heard any tales ... all his people were gone ... he, in turn, drifted through a city that he had no business being in.’ (Indriðason 2006: 202).

THE RESOLUTION OF CRIMES

In small communities where everyone seems ‘related or connected in some way’ (Indriðason 2004: 270) any crime affects everyone. Iceland had a complex legal system from 930 AD onwards, with courts at fixed locations and times to help with dispute resolution (Byock 2001:

² With thanks to Gunnþórunn Gunnlaugsdóttir for the translation.

170-184). Additionally, ‘public opinion at large carried significant influence’ (Byock 2001: 226). The need for peaceful resolution of conflicts, and the importance of law, is reflected in the sagas. Gísli is outlawed as punishment for his part in the murder of his brother-in-law. Gunnlaugr and his rival Hrafn fight a duel at the Althing (the National Assembly) but the Althing then bans duelling, and the rivals have to go to Norway to finish their fight.

Personal responsibility for vengeance in the sagas (Árnason 1991: 171) is replaced in the novels by Erlendur’s police work and the resulting official actions on behalf of society.

LONELINESS/ISOLATION

The sagas describe the isolation of the scattered settlements of the Saga Age. Indriðason communicates the same atmosphere of physical isolation, especially in *Strange Shores*, and the mental isolation of one person from another. Because of Erlendur’s job dealing with ‘all the filth’ he has forgotten ‘how ordinary people live’ (Indriðason 2004: 231). He ‘felt the deep silence that reigned in his life. Felt the solitude all around him’ (Indriðason 2006: 64), and sees ‘his own future of loneliness and solitude’ (Indriðason 2008: 111).

‘The families that Indriðason describes ... are anything but the origin of cohesion, continuity, and strength and instead the locus of conflict, loss, and disconnection’, and ‘the social and familial worlds that Indriðason constructs make this kind of failure to connect a defining feature of Icelandic identity.’ (Burke 2012: 203).

Erlendur blames himself for failing his children. His daughter Eva Lind is a drug addict and Erlendur despairs of her way of life (Indriðason 2007: 293; 2004: 195). For her part, Eva Lind cannot forgive him for leaving her as a small child. Erlendur occasionally experiences family life with Eva Lind, but does not ‘allow himself the luxury of expecting this joy to last’ (Indriðason 2004: 117). The pattern repeats through the novels: Erlendur’s colleague Sigurður Óli has ‘a horrific vision of the future’ when his partner Bergthóra tells him he ‘is getting as bad as that old fart Erlendur’ (Indriðason 2006: 159). Later, Bergthóra leaves Sigurður Óli ‘without his making any real effort to save [their relationship]’ (Indriðason 2012: 153).

LOVE STORIES

The romantic and tragic *Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* is the best-known saga in English (Whaley 2002: xxiii). Helga and Gunnlaugr fall in love as teenagers but she marries Hrafn when Gunnlaugr fails to return as promised from three years’ travelling. The stories of Mathildur and Ezra in *Strange Shores* (Indriðason 2013), Tómas and Ilona in *The Draining*

Lake (Indriðason 2008) and Davíð and Guðrún in *Hypothermia* (Indriðason 2009) reflect the great love stories of the sagas.

The novels also tell us about Erlendur's love for his little brother, his complex love for his daughter, and his happiness with his friend Valgerður. Valgerður is attractive, smiling and happy, everything that Erlendur 'was not but would love to be' (Indriðason 2008: 330). They become lovers, but the important thing is that they talk, as Gunnlaugr and Helga do.

DREAMS AND PREDICTIONS

The verbal predictions and prophetic dreams of the sagas also occur in Indriðason's work. Erlendur himself dreams frequently, usually about his brother Bergur (Indriðason 2007: 260; 2013: 295) or his daughter (Indriðason 2008: 256-8; 2004: 119). Eva Lind dreams about Bergur's death and thinks that the boy she saw drowning was her father. "It was you" Eva Lind said' (Indriðason 2008: 283), and this may be a prediction as well as a dream.

TRAGIC HEROES AND FATE

Fate is all-important in the sagas: in *The Saga of Gísli Súrsson* Gísli says 'Whatever is meant to happen will happen' (*The Sagas*: 511), and in *The Saga of the People of Laxárdal* King Olaf of Norway says, on farewelling Kjartan and his men, 'But difficult it will be to alter that destiny which awaits them' (*The Sagas*: 357).

The sagas of the warrior poets like *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* tell of heroes who die having been unable to free themselves of their 'obsessive love' (Whaley 2002: xvi). Erlendur, like them, is unable to free himself from his own obsession. He blames himself for losing hold of his brother's hand in the blizzard (Indriðason 2008: 284), and guilt still torments him 'like a cancer that eventually kills you' (Indriðason 2006: 241).

Erlendur feels that he has already lost his life up on the moors (Indriðason 2007: 271) and although he tells Eva Lind "Your fate isn't in your own hands" (Indriðason 2007: 41), he also believes that you choose your own fate (Indriðason 2009: 233), and his own choice becomes inevitable. When he goes on leave saying he might 'lose himself' (Indriðason 2009: 268) the mental dangers are as real as the physical ones, because for him 'time had come to a standstill' (Indriðason 2013: 275).

Erlendur is a saga-like hero, and he, like a saga hero, has to die in the series, just as Gunnlaugr dies after his duel with Hrafn in *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*, Gísli is killed defending himself in *The Saga of Gísli Súrsson*, and Kjartan and Bolli are murdered in *The Saga of the People of Laxárdal*. Erlendur rejects his own professional worth, the improving

relationships with his son and daughter and his chance of happiness with Valgerður, dismissing them almost carelessly from his thoughts (Indriðason 2013: 280).

In the last book of the main series, *Strange Shores* (Indriðason, 2013) Erlendur deliberately sets off on a presumably fatal journey, and his death from hypothermia seems as inescapable as death was for the saga heroes. ‘Events had to take their course’ (Whaley 2002: 142) for him just as much as for Gunnlaugr in *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*. Fate is the key link between the novels and the sagas and it seems that Indriðason has always intended that fate should determine Erlendur’s destiny too. ‘Above all else [Erlendur] is an Icelander’ (Indriðason 2001).

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